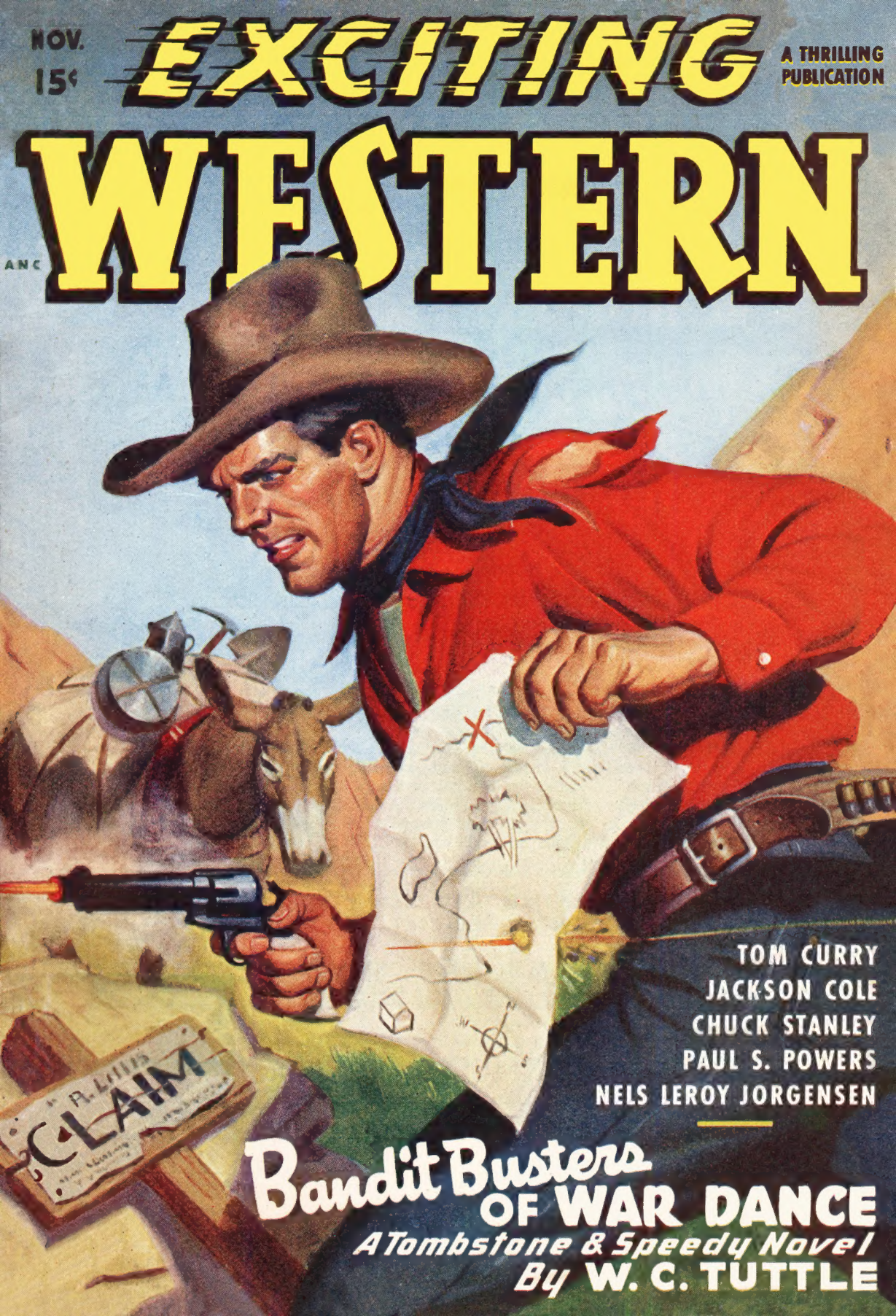
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A Tombstone & Speedy Novel
By W. C. TUTTLE

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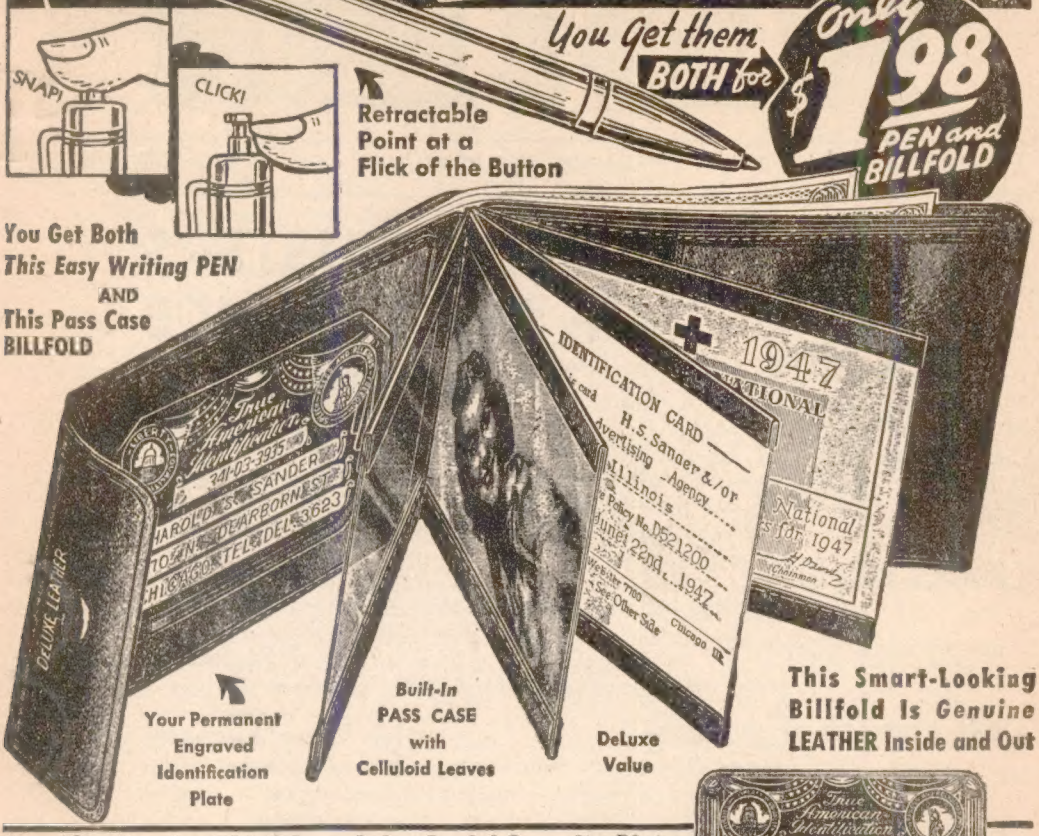

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VOL. 14, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION NOVEMBER, 1947

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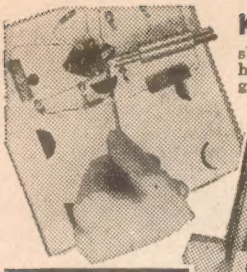

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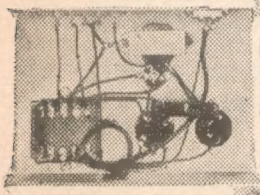

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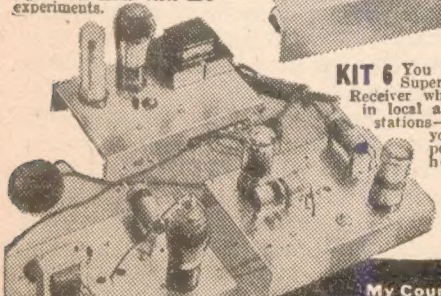

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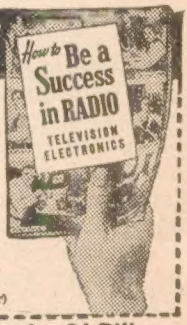

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A Department for Readers Conducted by CAPTAIN RANGER

BELIEVE it not, you western-minded hombres and hombresses, what is likely to prove the greatest land rush in the West is in the making—right now. It is already under way out in the Pacific Northwest in Washington and Oregon. And it is due to gather momentum as time goes on.

At present, veterans of World War II are deservedly getting first choice of the rich, new undeveloped farms being opened up on Government land in the vicinity of such gigantic Bureau of Reclamation projects as Grand Coulee dam in Washington and the Klamath Basin in southwestern Oregon.

In both these projects irrigation is bringing water to thousands of thirsty acres of potentially productive farm soil. Over a period of years new farms, and even new towns will spring up as more and more of the water-serviced country is allotted to home-seekers and brought into actual farm production.

Real Pioneering

It is going to be hard work at the start, real pioneering. Raw land must be cleared, buildings put up and the soil made ready for its first farm crops. But once they have begun to produce, these irrigation homesteads of anywhere from 40 to 100 acres that Uncle Sam is willing to give away, as far as the land itself is concerned, will be valuable properties, worth, according to some present estimates, in the general neighborhood of $10,000, each—and worth a lot more in security and clean, healthy, outdoor living to their holders!

Already some of the early bird vets have been awarded their veritable gold mines beneath the western sky in Oregon's Klamath Basin area. Not long ago a drawing was held in Klamath to determine who would be the lucky winners of 86 newly opened up Klamath Basin homesteads.

The drawing was necessary because more than 1,300 qualified vets had entered applications for the land. As a matter of fact, in case you've got a notion Americans aren't as western land-minded as were their forebears who blazed the first trails across the West, some 15,000 land seekers originally applied for these particular Klamath Basin farm tracts.

Appropriately enough and remindful of the draft days, the names or rather numbers of the lucky winners were pulled from a goldfish bowl.

Magic Numbers

The Klamath High School band struck up a fanfare that crashed against the armory ceiling. The bowl containing the magic numbers whirled round and round. E. L. Stephens, Klamath project superintendent, cracked open the first capsule drawn. He unfolded the paper . . . 128 had won the first farm.

A check and double check was made against the list of names. Yep, there it was. Land, a farm and future security for 128—Robert L. Smith of Banks, Oregon.

The hall was crowded. A momentary hush fell over the place as name and number were repeated. Everybody, it seems, was there but Bob Smith.

Later investigation disclosed that Smith, a veteran of the China-India-Burma theater for three years as a private in the AAF, was too busy to attend the drawings. He was home helping his folks on their 45-acre strawberry and filbert farm in Grove, Oregon. Anyhow he got his land. It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.

The drawing went on. An Easterner from Arlington, Virginia, G. McCracken, a former Navy flier, got the second farm. A little further down the line was No. 58—Eleanor Jane Bolesta of Everett, Washington, farm born and farm raised, and with a disabled veteran husband. Folks were kind of glad Eleanor Jane's number turned up among the winners.

Others among the fantastically lucky 86, all veterans, were Brett Law of Fresno, California and Theodore Godlewski of San Fran-

(Continued on Page 8)

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from Page 6)

cisco. Philip Krizo of Tule Lake got a farm too. It was a case of local boy makes good with Philip. His dad had come to this country from Czechoslovakia in 1912, worked around a bit and finally homesteaded in the Tule Lake country in Oregon before it became part of the Klamath Basin irrigation project.

Now father and son have farms of their own in the same region—western farms at that, snugged up against the California-Oregon border in the very shadow of towering Mount Shasta.

There will be other drawings later. This year and the next and the next for a long time to come not only in the Klamath Basin region but throughout the score or more major reclamation projects already edging towards completion in the West. They will be made as more public land comes progressively under the irrigation facilities of the different projects.

Free Farmers Are Free Men

The awarding of Government land to returning servicemen is an old American tradition. But this time something new has been added. The idea is not simply to donate as large an allotment per individual as possible, regardless of the land itself, its value or its crop producing qualities.

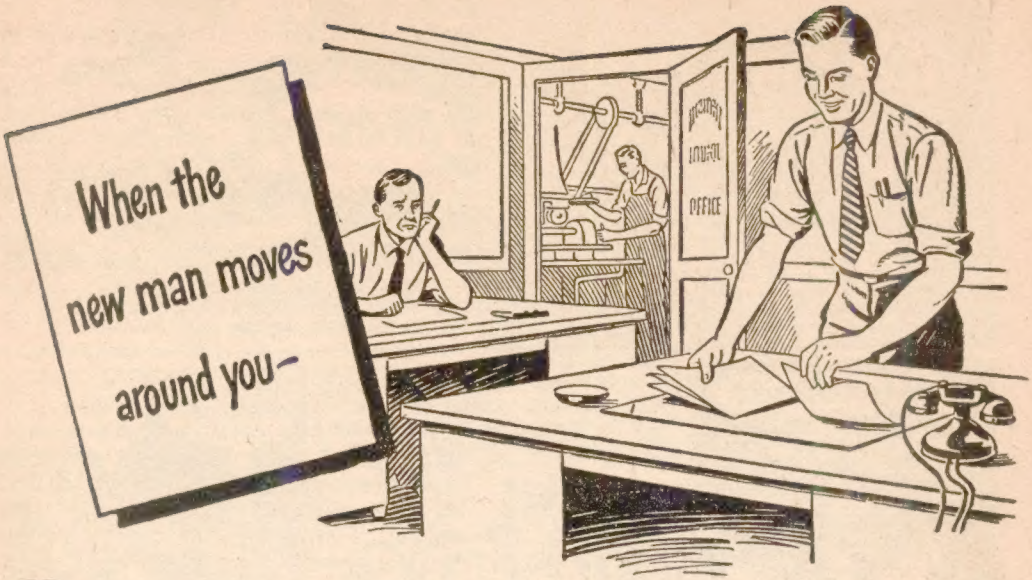
A broader significance has entered the picture. And the new policy is to award smaller acreages in areas where normal industry and enterprise will assure a reasonable or better than average agricultural success.

Behind this scheme is the further thought of establishing a greater number of family-type farms, lived on and operated by the title holders of the land themselves.

A fellow who owns and works his own farm is apt to have his feet on the ground literally and politically, and his heart in the continued welfare of his country. Free farmers are free men. And they are likely to want to remain that way.

Getting down to cases, just what are these recently awarded Klamath Basin farm tracts like? To start with the Klamath irrigation project consists of a string of small basins and flood plains, mostly along the Lost River where it twists through the series of broken hills that mark the break of the Cascade mountain range onto the high plains of eastern Oregon.

(Continued on Page 109)



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A Tombstone and Speedy Novel by W. C. TUTTLE

"If you let out one yip, Ortega, I'll pistol-whip you," said Tombstone

The rollicking range detectives are kidnaped by Border outlaws when a shoe-box full of money gets them in trouble down to their boots!

CHAPTER I

Boss of Agua Verde

TOMBSTONE JONES was not too happy. His sombrero dripped water on the bar-top in a little cantina in Agua Verde, as Tombstone gloomily contemplated the Mexican bartender. Tombstone was over seven feet tall in his high-heels and sombrero, and the old slicker failed to hide the fact that Tombstone was constructed after the specifications of a sand-hill crane.

There was one poker table and one roulette wheel in the place. Neither of them was in operation now. Tombstone had ten dollars fastened inside the lining of his old vest, but there was not a cent in his pockets. That blasted roulette wheel had rooked him out of two hundred dollars. That is, rooked him and

TOMBSTONE JONES

Speedy Smith. Now, he didn't know where Speedy might be. Speedy had gone out to get a bowl of chili two hours ago, and never had come back.

It was raining, too, and had been raining for hours. Tombstone felt of the end of his long nose. It was cold, like the nose of a pup. *"Tabernero,"* said Tombstone, "I wish—"

"Leesten, *mi amigo,*" interrupted the bartender, "I don' know w'ere ees your par'ner. Maybe you look for heem, eh?"

"I've looked through every knot-hole in this village of vice," sighed Tombstone. "I've done been in the palaces and pig pens, but I can't find him. His horse is still here, I know that much."

"You look een the *calabozo?*" asked the bartender quietly.

Tombstone drew a deep breath and expelled it slowly. The jail, that's right. Even a tough, border town, where law and order was found only in the dictionary, might have a jail. It was worth the effort. Speedy might be there. Speedy Smith was a small replica of Tombstone Jones, being about five feet seven, and might weigh a hundred pounds after all this rain. Speedy was not a bit diplomatic.

"Where-at is this here *calabozo?*" Tombstone said.

The bartender quietly gave him some directions, and Tombstone went out in the storm. The bartender shrugged his shoulders. These gringos! Their money was good, but their judgment was very bad. Some of Miguel Ortega's men would pick up this elongated Americano, and he, too, would be in jail. Miguel Ortega was the boss of Agua Verde. The bartender figuratively kissed Tombstone Jones good-by, and went back to work. Anyway, the gringo was broke.

Tombstone went out in the darkness and rain. There were no street lights in Agua Verde. Tombstone had his old Colt forty-five shoved inside the waistband of his overalls. The Agua Verde jail was a small adobe, box-like, with a heavy, oak door. There was only one window in the front, a small, square aperture, heavily barred.

NO LIGHTS were visible. The one huge padlock was unlocked. Carefully Tombstone tested the door, but found it locked from the inside. Somebody was inside the jail, keeping out of the rain. Then he knocked quietly with the butt of his gun, flattening himself against the wall beside the door. No doubt the builder had been loaded with tequila, because the door opened outward.

He heard the bar being removed from the inside, and a man swung it open, stepping half outside, as he did so. Tombstone Jones was a man of action—not words. He hit the man on the chin with his left fist, knocking him back into the jail. Then Tombstone removed the outside padlock, threw it into the room, and went in.

The jailer was sleeping peacefully. On a rough table was an old oil-lamp, dimly lighting the interior. There was one cell and two prisoners, one of which was Speedy Smith. He peered through the bars at Tombstone. The other man was big, fat and disheveled.

"What kept yuh so long?" asked Speedy.

"I made the mistake of lookin' for yuh in other places," replied Tombstone.

"The key to this apartment is on the table," said Speedy.

Tombstone unlocked the cell and both men came out.

"Mister Jones, meet Mister Atlas," Speedy said.

"Sudbury," corrected the fat man. "Philadelphia."

"Sudbury, Philadelphia, eh? Never heard of it."

"Sudbury is my name, sir."

"You told me it was Atlas," said Speedy. "Make up yore mind."

"I am Clement P. Sudbury. My name is not Atlas, if you please. I told you I am one of the owners of the Atlas Cattle Company."

"How'd they happen to jail you, Speedy?" asked Tombstone.

"Disturbin' the peace, I reckon. I found a tarantuler in my bowl of chili, and me and the cook had an argument. He can't understand English, and I can't *hablar* much *Mejicano,* so it ended up with me chokin' his mouth open and makin' him swaller the bug. He shore understood that kinda stuff—and here I was."

"What happened to you, Mr. Clement?"

"Sudbury, sir. Atlas P—oh, it doesn't matter. It was a personal matter. They held me here, waiting the consummation of a—er—business deal. I've been here since last night. What a horrible way to conduct business! I resent such methods, I tell you!"

The guard was recovering from the knockout. He had no gun. They sat him up in a chair, but he got nasty, so they locked him in the cell.

"How about pickin' up the rollin' stock and headin' north," Tombstone said. "If we stay here, maybe it'll be for keeps. You don't mind bein' saved, do yuh, Mr. Atlas?"

"The name is—oh, well, it doesn't matter. Do you know my son? He is Clement P. Sudbury, the Second."

"Who does he tend bar for?" asked Speedy.

"Tend bar? My son? A Sudbury, tending bar! Ridiculous! Why do you ask me that?"

"Well, we know quite a few," said Speedy soberly.

"I see." Mr. Sudbury flapped his arms dismally. His well-tailored clothes were badly disheveled, his necktie askew.

"I may as well tell you," he said wearily. "My son is heir to my whole estate. Millions—the young fool! And he fell in love with Lolita. Pretty, but rather greasy, I thought. He's infatuated, the young fool! It had to be broken up. I came down here to buy her off. She don't love him—she loved his money.

"They wanted five thousand dollars. She promised to go down to Mexico City, and forget. We negotiated for

SPEEDY SMITH

hours. I had no such money with me. I gave them a check for five thousand, on the bank at Arrowhead. They were to have Slim De Long, foreman of the Atlas Cattle Company, cash the check for them. I wrote instruction to Slim. They—well, I had to stay here until the deal was consummated."

"One born every thirty seconds," said Speedy soberly. "Yuh're best bet is to forget the whole deal and git out with us."

"But it was a legitimate deal, sir. I felt that it was cheap."

Tombstone shook his head sadly. "Maybe," he said, "you'd be better off if we took yore check-book and locked yuh in the cell again. At least, yore heir would profit. No, I reckon you better go back with us, if we can git back, and—"

"Too late!" whispered Speedy. "Somebody is among us."

SOMEONE knocked sharply on the door. Tombstone, gun in hand, flung it open, and a man stumbled in, swathed in a slicker, a big Mexican sombrero atop his head. Speedy yanked the door shut behind him. The Mexican blinked at the tableau, trying to figure out just what had happened.

"This here specter looks a heap like Miguel Ortega," Speedy said. "Keep yore hands right where they are, my friend."

"You completed the deal?" asked Sudbury anxiously.

Ortega broke into a torrent of Spanish, which none of them understood. Tombstone lifted the big, upturned-brim sombrero off Ortega's head and poured a pint of water on the floor. "In English—what happened?" asked Speedy.

"Those peeg!" snorted Ortega. "He ees nots got so much money on the bank!"

"Just a moment!" snapped Sudbury. "That is not true. I have at least ten thousand dollars in that bank."

Ortega shrugged his heavy shoulders and spread his hands.

"W'at can I say?" he asked appealingly. "I weel show you."

His right hand went into his slicker pocket and came out with a six-shooter. It might have worked—with credulous folks, but Tombstone and Speedy were range-wise. Tombstone smacked Ortega on the chin with his right hand, and Speedy kicked the gun out of his hand. It was all over in a split-second. Ortega was sitting on the floor and the gun was at the other end of the room.

"As you was about to say," reminded Tombstone, blowing on his knuckles.

ORTEGA spat painfully and shook his head.

"That ruins things, I'm afraid," Sudbury said.

"Kinda r u i n e d Ortega." Speedy grinned. "We might as well get that check back, if he can't cash it."

Miguel Ortega cursed them with every Spanish invective at his command, but they ignored him and made a complete search of all his pockets. But there was no check. Sudbury was indignant.

"You cashed that check and kept the money, Ortega," Sudbury said.

"I don' cash notheeng!" yelped Ortega. "Somebody ees crooked!"

"You are a thief, sir," declared Sudbury soberly.

"I am gots dobble-cross," wailed Ortega.

"What did Slim De Long say?" asked Sudbury.

"He say you mak' meestakes, biccause there ees nots so much money on the bank. He keep the check."

"Hm-m-m-m," said Sudbury thoughtfully. "I see-e-e."

"And," said Tombstone, "you came back to kill Sudbury."

Ortega didn't say—he just scowled.

"All right, sir," said Sudbury. "You must understand that I have no more dealings with you. I do not like your attitude. You are no gentleman. Good night, sir."

Speedy and Tombstone grinned, and Tombstone said:

"We're lockin' Ortega in his own cell. Maybe you don't realize it, but this hombre would cut our throats for a dime. He's jist one of Mexico's undesirables. Some day his own folks will get him, if somebody else don't git him first. All right, Ortega—into the dog-house."

"Those world ees nots too beeg," said Ortega soberly, "and I weel gots all of you. Ortega never forgots anytheeng."

"I'll borrow yore rain-coat, Ortega," said Tombstone. "You won't need it tonight unless the roof leaks. *Buenas noches, mofeta.*"

They went outside. Ortega's horse was there against the wall. They helped Sudbury to mount the animal, and led it up to their two horses at a hitch-rack. It was raining hard now. They got quickly into their saddles and rode north. Sudbury said he was capable of handling his own horse. Suddenly he exclaimed:

"Those ignorant fools! Do you realize that in their cupidity they forged a check so large that my balance would not cover it?"

"Did you jist figure that out?" asked Tombstone.

"Why, yes, I just realized it."

"Brother," said Speedy, "you ought to throw in with me and Tombstone—we're almost that dumb, too."

"I am not dumb, sir, but I may be a bit confused."

"That's a good'n," chuckled Speedy. "I'll use that alibi next time I see Jim Keaton."

"Keaton?" queried Sudbury. "Keaton. Yes, I remember having some correspondence with a James Keaton. Secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, is he not?"

"Same name," replied Speedy.

They reached the unlocked gate at the Border. Tombstone asked Sudbury if he knew how to get to the Atlas spread.

"Oh, certainly. It is several miles further, if you go around through Arrowhead City, but I know a short-cut. There is a trail, which ends at this gate. I'm sure I can find it in the dark."

Ducking low, they rode through the excited riders before anyone had a chance to stop them

"Ole Eagle-Eye," murmured Speedy.

Sudbury said: "You must go to the ranch with me. After all, I am grateful to you boys. Without you, I might have been embarrassed, you know."

"No end," added Speedy. "You lead the way, pardner."

"Thank you. I feel that I should do something to show my appreciation."

CHAPTER II

Package of Money

CLEMENT P. Sudbury found a trail. No doubt, it was not the right trail. They rode in single file, with Sudbury in the lead. It was as dark as the inside of a black cat, and the rain kept falling. There was no conversation, because all efforts were directed at keeping wet branches out of their faces. Sudbury said it was about seven miles from the gate to the ranch-house. After they had covered what Tombstone considered ten miles, winding around through the brush, he asked Sudbury if he didn't think they were a bit lost.

"The regular trail, as I remember it," said Sudbury, "runs in a fairly straight line."

"Then somebody shore put a wiggle in it tonight." Speedy shivered. "I think we've been followin' a lost cow."

The clouds broke away for a few moments, and Tombstone exclaimed:

"Houses! Mebbe we've got there and didn't know it!"

"Spooktown!" snorted Sudbury. "I remember it now!"

"I don't like the sound of that," said Tombstone. "Not in the dark, anyway. What do yuh mean, Sudbury?"

The faint light faded and the houses disappeared.

Sudbury said:

"This is part of the Atlas property. It is an old deserted mining town. No one lives here, and the boys say it is haunted. That is ridiculous, of course. No intelligent person believes in ghosts."

"Then it's a awful scary place for us three," remarked Speedy. They went on for about a mile.

"Look!" whispered Tombstone. "A—a light! No, it's gone again."

"Yuh're seein' things," whispered Speedy. "Ghosts don't need a light."

"That's what I figured. C'mon—easy."

They moved their horses slowly off to the right, and came in against a small shack.

"Two horses here, and ghosts don't ride," Tombstone whispered.

Tombstone and Speedy dismounted, handing their reins to Sudbury. There was only one small window, heavily patched with paper, but they could see a faint light now.

"Somebody gettin' out of the rain, mebbe," Speedy whispered.

For no legitimate reason whatever Tombstone shoved the door open and they stepped into the shack. There was a candle on a table, and two men were there. The light was not sufficient for them to see what the two men looked like. Candle-light flashed on a gun in one man's hand.

"Cuidado!" he rasped.

He had barely voiced his warning, when Tombstone hit him full in the face with his wet sombrero. The gun went off, but the bullet smacked into the wall, as Tombstone dived into the man, crashing him against the rough wall.

The other man, evidently not of the shooting type, tried to leap past Speedy, heading for the doorway, but Speedy tripped him in flight, and got an upside-down view of the man as he pin-wheeled out into the dark and rain. Tombstone got up slowly. His antagonist had struck the back of his head against the wall, and slept peacefully.

"Anyway, it's dry in here," remarked Tombstone calmly.

"Much obliged, boys."

They both whirled toward the rough bunk against the wall where a man was lying. Speedy took the candle and they looked the man over. He was tied tightly, but he was grinning up at them.

"What was they tryin' to do, keep yuh out of the rain?" asked Tombstone.

"I am almost that dumb," replied the man. "Mind cutting me loose? Unless I'm mistaken, very soon, some *mucho malo hombres* will be with us, and it might be embarrassing."

Tombstone took the ropes off his ankles and wrists, and the man sat up.

"You spoke of company comin'," remarked Tombstone.

"Yes. Those two men were expecting them at any moment. I suggest that we vacate this place."

They did, but they couldn't find Clement P. Sudbury. The man who did the acrobatics through the doorway must have frightened Sudbury's horse, and it had pulled out with him. The other two horses had moved in against the shack. However, there were the two extra horses. Evidently the acrobatic one did not stop to bother about a horse, and the other man was still *hors de combat*.

THEY were about to mount, when Tombstone said:

"Pardner, we don't sabe none of this stuff so, if yuh don't mind, we won't talk about it to anybody. I laid that feller's head awful hard against that two-by-four, and we ain't exactly sure we was fightin' on the right side."

"Suits me," replied the man. "I believe we understand each other perfectly."

"Well," said Tombstone, "I understand *me* pretty good, and that's all I'm interested in. Do yuh know the way out of this brush?"

"All I know is—" began the man, and then they were suddenly confronted by several riders.

"What's goin' on here?" asked one of the riders.

"Scatter!" yelled the man Tombstone had released.

Tombstone whirled his horse, socked home his spurs, and almost knocked a horse and rider over. Several shots were fired, but Tombstone was too busy dodging brush to do any shooting. Luckily the clouds closed up again, cutting off any illumination. There was no sound of pursuit. Tombstone let his horse pick its own way, and in about a half hour he cut a fairly well traveled road.

The moon was out again, glistening on the rain-filled ruts of the old road. Tombstone had no idea of the way to Arrowhead City. He was sitting on his horse, trying to determine which way to go, when he heard the sounds of a wheeled equipage.

"Mebbe it's somebody who knows the way," said Tombstone to his tired horse. "We'll ask 'em."

A horse and buggy came around a turn, traveling fast. Tombstone was in full view, holding up his right hand, and he distinctly saw something thrown out of the buggy. For some reason, possibly afraid of a holdup, the driver slashed the horse with a whip, trying to race around Tombstone. The rain had been falling for several days, and the driver did not realize that the ground was well soaked. The wheels on the left side of the buggy went into the mud, throwing the buggy over, and spraying mud all over Tombstone.

From his own careening horse, Tombstone saw the driver, tossed bodily from the buggy, land in the brush, get to his feet and dive for cover. The horse tore itself loose and went galloping away.

"Jones," said Tombstone aloud, "there's queer people down in this country." With difficulty, he stopped his horse which had bolted in the opposite direction and turned back.

He mopped some mud off his face and rode down where he had seen the package drop into some brush. It was there all right, a black shoe-box, tied with plenty string. Tombstone got back on his horse and rode slowly up past the wrecked buggy, but there was no sign of the driver.

"I'll jist have to guess," said Tombstone sadly, and rode in the same direction as the one taken by the runaway horse. . . .

When trouble started in Spooktown, Speedy, like Tombstone, took off alone. He didn't know what became of the man they rescued, nor which way Tombstone had gone. He finally reached a road, which took him straight into Arrowhead City. He left his horse at the feed stable and went over to the old two-story hotel. Speedy was wet and miserable. The grizzled proprietor of the hotel looked him over curiously.

"I've got to have me a room," stated Speedy. "On second thought, yuh better make it for two."

"Ain't you alone?" whispered the man.

Speedy looked behind himself, turning his head slowly. Then he turned back.

"What kind of a dad-blasted country yuh got down here?" he asked. "We take a man out of a Mexican *carcel*, find another one all tied up in a shack, turn him loose and then git jumped on by a bunch of *bandidoes* in the dark. And now," Speedy's jaw jutted belligerently, "you whisper, askin' if I'm alone.

What's wrong with folks?"

"I know what's wrong with me," whispered the old man.

"Speak up—I'm yore friend."

"I've got me some larny-geetus."

"That's all right—you keep it. I ain't connected with the law. Yore secret is safe with me."

"I've got it in my throat."

"That's a fine place to hide anythin'! At yore age, too. Do I git a room? I'm soaked and sorrowful, and I need a soft place to lay the remains for a spell."

"Where-at is the other end of the set?"

"Oh, yeah, him."

SPEEDY looked toward the door, drew a deep breath and said:

"Well, if yuh see a feller who has to duck down to git through the doorway come in, and if yuh can't see him a-tall when he stands edgeways, send him up to my room, will yuh?"

"Yeah," whispered the man. "Here's yore key. Number Six, right down the hall. If there ain't no water there, I'll bring yuh some."

"I don't want no water, do yuh hear me? I know when I've had me enough of that stuff. I'm goin' to git me a sailor suit."

Speedy was wrapped in a blanket, his wet clothes spread out on all the available furniture, when Tombstone came in. He sailed his wet sombrero over a bed post and sat down. Speedy said:

"Got away alive, huh?"

"Yeah, I think so. Is there some secret about you bein' here?"

Speedy stared. "Secret? Why?"

"When I came into the hotel, that old clerk down there, pointed to the stairs and whispered, 'Number Six,' and I sneaked all the way up here. What's all the whisperin' about? Yuh don't reckon this place is ha'nted, too, do yuh?"

"Mebbe it is," replied Speedy soberly. "I seen a white bed-bug."

"Prob'ly got caught in the rain and faded out his colors. What became of that other feller, Speedy?"

"I don't know. When he yelled scatter, I scattered. What yuh got there?"

Tombstone explained about the wrecked buggy and the tossed-aside package. He took off his boots, carried them to the window and upended them outside. From down below came a muttered curse. Tombstone grinned and shut the window. His wet socks went on the floor, and he draped his wet pants over a chair.

"Yuh know," he remarked, "it might be a good idea to open that box. Might be somethin' in there to show who owns it."

Tombstone carefully untied all the knots, laid the string aside and took off the cover. For several moments he stared at the contents. Then he blinked at the lamp, ran his fingers through his rumpled hair.

"Heaven is my home!" he remarked inanely.

"And you with a one-way ticket," said Speedy.

"I—I dunno jist what—whoa, Blaze!"

The box slid off his lap, upended on the carpet, and currency cascaded off across the floor. Speedy stared at the money, slowly reached up and pinched his nose violently.

"I've done had me some awful funny dreams," he said slowly, "but mostly allus I'm in a crowd, without no pants."

"A million dollars!" whispered Tombstone. "Imagine us with a cool million dollars. We could tell Jim Keaton to go to blazes."

"It ain't ours," said Speedy definitely. "You seen a man throw—wait a minute! If anybody knew we had it—"

"Honesty," said Tombstone sadly, "is shore a painful policy."

"It belongs to somebody, Tombstone. Mebbe they got it honestly, and they figured you was a holdup, so they ditched it. We can't be caught with it. Put it back in the box and tie it up agin. I'm takin' it down and have the hotel man put it in his safe."

"Yea-a-ah," whispered Tombstone, "I'll do it. But it's like takin' my life blood."

Tombstone replaced the string, handed the box to Speedy, who went over to the door with it.

"You ort to put on yore pants, Speedy," he said.

"Yeah, that's right. Look better, I reckon."

Speedy came back in a few minutes, bearing a letter. He sat down, heaved a sigh and said:

"They made me sign that hotel register, and when the old man saw yore name, he gave me this letter. It's from Jim Keaton."

"He ain't mad at us, is he, Speedy?"

"Mildly. Here's what he says, 'Wire

me as soon as you get this letter and wait there for instructions. No money will be sent, until I know you are ready to go to work, because you can't get far enough away from a roulette wheel to be of any value to me. Keep in touch with me. I never know whether you are alive or dead—I hope. Sincerely—Jim Keaton.' "

"That letter is a insult," declared Tombstone. "If it wasn't for me and you, that blasted cattle association wouldn't amount to a row of pins, and he knows it. Won't send us no money! For two cents I'd quit bein' the best range detective on earth. I'd be happy to punch cows for forty dollars a month."

Speedy looked curiously at Tombstone. "You didn't find somethin' to drink, while I was downstairs, didja?" he asked.

"I'm as sober as a judge, Speedy."

"Well, I reckon it's jist a lack of brains. I'll telegraph Jim in the mornin'. He'll be glad to know we're well and ready to work."

"If you think so I ain't the only one that's crazy."

CHAPTER III

Sudbury's Check

IN THE cold light of day Arrowhead City was a typical Border cow-town, with mining affiliations. Most of the architecture was of frame and adobe. The biggest structure in the town was the War Path Saloon. The ordinarily dusty street was sloppy with mud now. Tombstone and Speedy slept late, put on half-dried clothes and went down to the little hotel restaurant for breakfast. Speedy sent a telegram to Keaton, telling him they were ready for work.

They were standing in front of the hotel, when a buckboard came down the main street and drew up at the stage-depot. Tombstone and Speedy recognized Clement P. Sudbury. There were three men in the buckboard, and they guessed that one of them was Sudbury's

As the wagon overturned and the driver was tossed out, Tombstone's horse bolted in the opposite direction

son. He was short and fat. The other man was Slim DeLong, foreman for the Atlas Cattle Company.

The three men sat in the buckboard and talked for a while, before De Long got out and unloaded several pieces of baggage. The young man got out and sauntered down toward Tombstone and Speedy.

"Lolita," remarked Speedy quietly, "must have astigmatism."

The young man came up to them, a half-smile on his face. Speedy said, "Howdy, pardner."

"Good morning, gentlemen. My father asked me to talk with you. He recognized you, of course. He is very grateful to you and he—er—asked me to give you this small token."

The small token was fifty dollars apiece. It looked like a million dollars just at that time. Tombstone said:

"Merry Christmas to him, too."

"I'll tell him," smiled the boy. "He asked me to—well, he doesn't want anything said about last night. A man in his position—you realize, of course. Might be embarrassing. We talked it all over this morning. Of course, Slim De Long will say nothing."

Tombstone scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"We're kinda dumb about all this," he said. "Just why did they have yore pa in jail?"

"He didn't tell you? I thought he did. Well, Dad went down there and made a few bets on the roulette, not realizing that he had left his bill-fold at the ranch. They know who he is, so they let him run up quite a bill. It seems that they are rather cautious down there, so they held Dad until one of them could come up to the bank and cash his check. The joke was on Dad."

"Yeah, that's right," Speedy agreed. "Well, I hope you stay away from Lolita after this."

The young man stared at Speedy. "You hope what?"

"Yo're in love with Lolita, ain't yuh?"

"You mean Miguel Ortega's girl?"

"Oh, is she his girl?"

"Ain't you aimin' to marry her?" asked Tombstone.

"Me? What is the joke, gentlemen?"

"If we find out the answer, we'll tell yuh," replied Speedy.

"I'll not be here," said the smiling young man. "I am leaving on the stage. My vacation is over and my Alma Mater is calling. I shall be back next summer, if all goes well. Thank you both."

"Yuh're shore welcome," said Speedy.

The young man went back to the stage depot.

"What's yore verdict, Speedy?" Tombstone said.

"Guilty," said Speedy. "Slim De Long and Ortega framed that yarn on Sudbury. They built up a love affair that never existed. Don't yuh see the angle? They told Sudbury that the kid was goin' to marry Lolita, and the old man went down to buy her off. Then they built up a check too big for the bank to honor, and—well, they rained on their own parade. I'll bet they didn't forge that check, they boosted it to twenty-five thousand, and couldn't cut it back to five."

"Yuh're awful smart, Speedy."

"I know I am. Sometimes it worries me."

"We've got a hundred dollars."

"Don't look at that War Path Saloon, like a coyote pup lookin' at a chicken. What we need most is dry clothes. C'mon."

CLAD once more in dry socks and underclothes, and each one sporting a new shirt, they drifted into the sheriff's office. Behind the sheriff's battered desk was a thin, hawk-faced man, slightly gray, and with eyes that didn't exactly seem to track. He and Tombstone stared at each other intently. Finally the man said quietly:

"Have yuh got that ten bucks with yuh, Tombstone?"

"That's a lot of money, Friday."

"At six percent a year, yuh owe me seventy-two cents, too. It was twelve years ago in Pocatello, Idaho, if yuh remember."

"Debts," said Speedy, "are outlawed in seven years."

"So," said the deputy, "you bring a lawyer with yuh, eh?"

"Mister Fish," said Tombstone soberly, "I'd like to have yuh meet Speedy Smith."

Friday Fish shook hands with Speedy Smith. Tombstone said:

"You was a chambermaid in a livery-stable the last time I seen yuh, Friday. How'd yuh ever happen to git this far south?"

"Well, I'll tell yuh, Tombstone—I

joined the cavalry, and they sent me down here. Served the hitch, and somebody stole my horse."

"The sheriff must be a trustin' soul."

"The sheriff," corrected Friday, "is my brother-in-law."

"Coercion, eh?" remarked Speedy. "What's goin' on down here? Anythin'?"

"Nothin', Speedy. If you came down here to find somethin' goin' on, yuh're out of luck. The folks around these parts are even too lazy to deal off the bottom of the deck. The latest crime story we've done heard about was when Cain killed Abel."

"They got Cain, huh?" queried Tombstone innocently.

"Oh, shore. It was a dead, open-and-shut case. What are you two doin' down here—lookin' for work? Don't answer."

"We won't," said Speedy. "Yuh can never tell who's listenin'."

"I've often wondered," sighed Tombstone. "'Course, I took my time goin' back. I was gone exactly five hours."

Friday did some mental arithmetic, sighed and began rolling a cigarette. "You made twenty-four miles an hour, Jones," he said.

"It was a rough country," said Tombstone, apologetically. "You know, fences and hills slow yuh down. One time I hit the edge of a deep canyon, and had to cut back a few miles to git around it. If I'd had a road to run on, brother, I'd prob'ly have set a record. Still, I dunno. I was jist gettin' over a sprained ankle."

"I'll buy a drink," said Friday. "A man can only stand so much."

They leaned on the long bar in the War Path Saloon. There was quite a crowd in the place, even at that hour. A man was polishing a roulette layout, and Tombstone looked him over

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"We're workin' for the Government," said Tombstone.

"Yuh are? Secret work?"

"No, it ain't. We was sent down here to soak up some information on the annual rainfall of War Dance Valley."

"Explain somethin' to us," said Speedy. "We heard folks speak about a place called Spooktown. Have yuh got a town by that name?"

"No-o, not any more. It was a early minin' town, down ag'in the Border. It's on the Atlas spread. Nobody lives there. Most of it has fallen in, anyway."

"Any ghosts?" asked Tombstone.

"Oh, shore. Assorted sizes and shapes, they tell me. I ain't never seen none m'self, but I believe what I've heard."

"I killed one oncet," said Tombstone soberly.

"Yuh can't kill a ghost," declared Friday. "A bullet don't even faze 'em."

"I ran this'n to death."

"You chased him to death?"

"I didn't say that. At times we was runnin' a dead-heat, but I pulled ahead in the home-stretch. At the end of sixty miles he laid down and e-vaporated."

"Sixty miles? Yuh mean—huh! How long did it take yuh to make sixty miles?"

thoughtfully. It was the same man they had rescued in the little shack, looking none the worse for wear. He looked over at the bar, but did not seem to recognize them. Tombstone asked Friday who the fellow was.

"Name's Tony Metro," replied Friday. "He works the faro and the roulette. Ain't been here over a couple months. Nice feller."

THE few dollars in Tombstone's pocket had started a slow burn, but he ignored the heat. Roulette was his greatest vice. Dan Ewart, the sheriff, came in with Slim De Long, foreman of the Atlas company, and Friday introduced them to Tombstone and Speedy. Slim was short and heavy-set, flat-cheeked and with eyes as round as a dime. Dan Ewart was a big, raw-boned person, with heavy cheek-bones and a jutting chin. Ewart said:

"Old Jim Haley, the feller which runs the hotel, tells me that you boys had quite a time last night."

"Was he listenin' to Tombstone snore?" asked Speedy.

"He didn't say about that. He said you took a man out of jail in Agua Verde, and another one out of a shack on this side of the line."

Tombstone and Speedy looked at each other in amazement.

"That's shore a newsy item," remarked Speedy. "Tombstone, did you do that when I wasn't lookin'?"

"I must've done it in my sleep, if I did. Some folks have a re-markable imagination, seems to me. Me and Speedy rode in from Coldwater in the rain last night."

"Old Jim must have been dreamin'," said Slim De Long. "I'll buy a drink."

Slim De Long knew that they were lying, because Sudbury had told him what happened in Mexico and part of what happened at the old shack in Spooktown. However, Sudbury's horse had pulled out before he had a chance to know exactly what went on in the shack.

BEFORE Slim went back to the ranch, he met Tombstone and Speedy on the street.

"I didn't want to tell the sheriff what Sudbury said," he told them. "I reckon the Kid told yuh to keep still about it, 'cause he didn't want the Old Man to get in bad over the deal."

Tombstone grinned. "That's all right. The only thing we don't know is who we cut loose in that shack. It was too dark, and we had to make a quick break. Maybe they got him—we don't know."

"Didn't he tell yuh who he was?"

"No, he didn't, and the blasted candle blew out. I hope he got out of the deal. I wouldn't tell the sheriff, 'cause we can't prove anythin', except that we mixed into somethin' that wasn't none of our business."

"Yo're smart," said Slim seriously. "Much obliged for protectin' Sudbury."

"Yo're welcome. Slim, yuh don't need a couple good cowpokes, do yuh?"

"No, I don't—I'm full-handed right now."

"Thank yuh a lot. Is there any other spread around here that might need a couple good men?"

"I'm pretty sure there ain't—not right now."

"That takes a load off m' mind," said Tombstone. "Some day we're goin' to find a vacancy—and have to pull out, or go to work."

"Friday said you two was workin' for the Government."

"Only when it rains," said Speedy. "We measure rain-fall in our boots."

CHAPTER IV

Masked Men

LATE that afternoon, it started raining again. There was nothing for Tombstone and Speedy to do, except wait for orders from Jim Keaton. No one on earth would ever suspect that these two were cattle detectives. Even Jim Keaton, the secretary, said that after a year of having them on the payroll of the association, he didn't even suspect them. Tombstone couldn't read nor write, but he had a vivid imagination, and the ability to prevaricate to the *nth* degree.

The rain was still hammering on the old tin roof of the hotel, when they climbed into bed that night, thankful to be dry. They were sitting up in their blankets, having a goodnight cigarette before extinguishing the light from the smelly, oil lamp when their unlocked door opened suddenly. Almost as suddenly, it closed, and they blinked at a masked man, covering them with a heavy Colt. He kept his back against the door until he was sure that everything was under control. Then he relaxed and came ahead a few steps, peering at them through the eye-holes of his bandanna handkerchief-mask.

Their gun-belts were hanging on the head-posts of the bed, and the masked man went carefully around the bed, yanked Speedy's gun from its holster, circled back and took Tombstone's gun.

"Might as well set down and take it easy," said Speedy. "Yore knees are bumpin' each other, pardner."

"Never mind my knees," growled the man. "Where's the shoe-box?"

Tombstone and Speedy looked at each other.

"Better humor him, I reckon," Tombstone said. "I'll betcha he thinks he's a pair of shoes."

"Don't act funny!" snarled the man. "You know what I mean. I want that shoe-box, and I want it quick."

"Shoe-box," said Speedy thoughtfully. "That's a funny thing to want, or are they so scarce yuh have to wear a mask

and pack a gun in order to git one. We appreciate yore feelin's in the matter, my friend, but we ain't in the shoe business. Yuh're welcome to anythin' else we've got, but we're more'n half out of shoe-boxes."

"Don't lie to me! You've got it and I want it. I ain't crazy, and you know it. I'm givin' yuh ten seconds to tell me where it is."

"That's a awful short time to find a thing like that, in a country where everybody wears boots."

"I'm countin'," warned the man. "One —two—"

"Education is a terrible thing, boy," declared Tombstone.

"What do yuh mean?"

"Bein' able to count."

"Three—four—"

"Wait!" interrupted Speedy. "Let's git this straight. If yuh're jist puttin' on a exhibition of arithmetic, let me tell yuh I went all through the mul'pication table. Countin' is simple. If you ain't jist showin' off yore education, why not tell us what'll happen to us when yuh say ten. After all, we're entitled to know."

"Yuh are, eh?" snarled the man. "All right, I'll tell yuh. If you don't give me that box after I count ten, I'll kill yuh both."

"Oh, that!" grunted Tombstone. "But why kill us?"

"I want that shoe-box, you fool!"

"I see. And after we're dead you'll find one, eh? Queer reasonin', if yuh ask me. Let's argue about it. A shoe-box is a awful small item to kill two men over, don't yuh think?"

"Don't act ignorant!"

"He ain't actin'," said Speedy.

"He ain't, huh? I want that shoe-box and the money!"

"Money, eh? Well, why didn't yuh say so. You interest me. If there's money, why can't us three make a deal?"

"Deal? Make a deal with you? Yuh're crazy. Listen! You know all about that money, and I'm through talkin'. Start talkin', 'cause I'm startin' countin' again! Five—six—seven—"

The masked man had his back to the unlocked door, and two more masked men had stepped into the room.

"Drop that gun, you blasted fool!" one of them said.

The gun dropped. The two newcomers stood there motionless, until one of them closed the door. They picked up the dropped gun, and took the two extra guns from the first masked man. Tombstone said:

"This is a great neighborhood, if yuh ask me. A masked man sticks yuh up, threatens to shoot yuh if yuh don't find him a shoe-box, and then two more masked men copper his bet. Are you fellers lookin' for a shoe-box, too, or are yuh jist lookin' for Sandy Claws?"

"Nobody asked for yore opinions," growled one of the men.

HE TURNED to the discomfited masked man and said harshly:

"All right, yuh coyote, go ahead and talk! We let yuh git away, 'cause we figured you'd lead us to that money. We sneaked up the back stairs behind yuh, and we've been listenin' at the door. Are yuh dead sure these men got it?"

"I dunno what yuh're talkin' about!" snapped the man. "I came here to borrow a horse."

"Yeah, we heard yuh talkin' about it."

"If we had a fiddler, we could have a

[*Turn Page*]

TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER

masquerade," remarked Speedy. "Yuh know, this is kind of fun, except that we don't know what yuh're arguin' about."

"Let 'em shoot it out," said Tombstone. "It ain't our business."

"It's goin' to be yore business, High Pockets."

"I have a feelin'," sighed Speedy, hugging his knees through a blanket, "that we're goin' to be taken into the firm."

"Yuh're a smart guy, huh?" snarled one of the men. "We like to deal with smart guys. Anyway, we owe yuh somethin' for turnin' that snake loose down at Spooktown."

"Yuh don't owe us anythin', pardner. It was a pleasure."

"And a little somethin' for takin' Sudbury out of Mexico," added the other man maliciously.

"He paid us," said Tombstone. "If you think it was worth somethin' for turnin' that other feller loose, we'll take it."

"You bet you'll take it—and plenty! Dig up the ropes. Maybe we better tie this coyote first. Yank a sheet off the bed. They make pretty good gags."

"Yuh're makin' a horrible mistake," said Tombstone.

"We've made a lot of 'em and one more won't make any difference."

They let Tombstone and Speedy put on their clothes, watching them like hawks. Then one man tied their wrists behind them and gagged them with strips of Old Jim Haley's sheets. One of the men scouted the hallway, declared that all was clear, and the five men went down the back stairs of the hotel, and out into the rain and fog.

The two men had a team and wagon on a dark, side street. They made the three prisoners lie down in the empty wagon-box, and threatened to shoot all three if one of them made any move. Tombstone and Speedy had no idea where they were being taken. They felt the wagon go off the hard, well-traveled road, and into much softer traveling, where the branches of the brush rasped the sides of the wagon.

Tombstone Jones was rope-wise. Several years ago a traveling rope-artist showed him how to let his wrists be tied. It was a matter of bunching muscles, and holding his wrists far enough apart—and not too far. The man who had just tied his wrists was in too much of a hurry to observe any shenanigan on the part of Tombstone Jones.

They were traveling over the muddy road, when Tombstone slid his hands free. He tore away the gag, and proceeded to untie his ankles. It was so dark that he was unable to see which one was Speedy, so he twisted around in the wagon, trying to be as careful as possible, when he suddenly found himself bumped out into space, and came down flat in the mud. The wagon box had no end-gate.

He sat up in an inch of water and six inches of mud, just in time to see the wagon disappear in the rain and fog. He got up, intending to chase the wagon, but his feet slipped and he fell flat on his face. This time he got up, grasped a bush for support and swore foolishly. He couldn't even hear the wagon now.

"Got my fresh socks and drawers all wet again!" he complained. "Dad-blame such people! They cain't even tie yuh up decently. Well, I reckon I'll have to wade back home agin."

He slopped and slid his way back to the main road, where the walking was much better, and headed for Arrowhead City. In his present condition he didn't want to go through the lobby, so he went up the back stairway and down the long hallway.

The door of his room was open, lamp lighted, and three men in there. One of them was Jim Haley, the hotel-keeper, the other two were strangers to Tombstone. They looked him over curiously. Tombstone was covered with mud. He even had mud on his eyebrows.

JIM HALEY told Tombstone that these two men were Ed Price and Con Elton, Border Patrol officers. They looked plenty hard.

"What happened to you, Jones?" asked Price. "You're all mud."

"Well," replied Tombstone soberly, "if yuh git low enough down in this country, you'll shore get awful messy."

"They wanted to talk with you," explained Jim Haley. "I thought you and Smith was in bed, but—well, who in the devil tore up my sheets thataway? Them sheets cost me plenty."

Tombstone went over to the bed, tossed a torn sheet aside and picked up his six-shooter.

"I thought that road-runner forgot it," he said. "I seen him lay it down while

he tore up the sheet, and I didn't see him pick it up again. He was a little nervous, I reckon."

Price turned to Jim Haley and said, "You can go back down, if yuh want to, Jim. Much obliged for yore trouble."

Jim Haley, the hotel-keeper left, closing the door behind him. Tombstone wiped some mud out of his collar and sat down.

"What happened, Jones?" asked Elton. Tombstone shook his head.

He didn't feel like lying to the officers so he told them the truth. But he didn't elaborate on the shoe-box and the money.

"So they thought you had some money that belonged to them, eh?" remarked Elton. "What gave them that idea, Jones?"

"They didn't say."

"Jones," said Price, "the other night you had some trouble in Agua Verde. All we know is what we've heard. We also heard that Sudbury, one of the owners of the Atlas outfit, was mixed up in it. Trouble in Agua Verde is a common thing, but Sudbury happens to be a millionaire. Did he tell you why he was in jail?"

"We ain't nosey," replied Tombstone soberly. "We didn't ask."

"I see. And, so we've heard, you found a man tied up in a shack. You cut that man loose, too. Do you know who he was?"

"Like I told yuh, we ain't nosey, officer, and it was too dark to see what he looked like."

"What do you know about Miguel Ortega, Jones?" asked Elton.

"I know he's mad at us." Tombstone grinned. "Yuh see, we stuck him in his own jail, locked the outside padlock and threw away the key."

The two officers grinned. This slat-like cowpoke was their sort of folks. Elton said:

"Would you mind telling us what happened here tonight?"

Tombstone didn't mind, and he told the truth. They thought it all over, but made no comments. The Border Patrol learn to keep their opinions to themselves. Price finally said:

"What's your business, Jones?"

Tombstone rubbed some dried mud out of his eyebrows.

"I reckon you'd say I'm a student, gents," he replied.

"A student, eh?" remarked Elton. "Just what are you studying?"

"Bandit-bustin'—mostly."

"Well," smiled Elton, "you're in a good classroom, Jones. This place is—"

Elton stopped. From out on the street came the report of a shot. The three men stepped over to the uncovered window, peering over at the War Path Saloon where men were milling around the lighted entrance.

"Some trouble over there, Con," Price said. "Better check, I reckon. See you later, Jones."

"I hope yuh do," said Tombstone soberly.

He pulled off his wet boots and drew on a pair of dry socks. As he was putting on a slicker, Jim Haley came to the doorway.

"Somebody shot Tony Metro, a gambler, over at the War Path, but he ain't quite dead yet. Now, about that there torn sheet. If—"

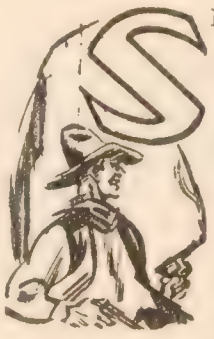
"Save it for bandages," interrupted Tombstone, and headed for the doorway.

Haley said: "You ain't goin' out and get wet agin, are yuh?"

"Yeah, and I ain't comin' back until I git good and wet this time."

CHAPTER V

Nervous Conspirators



SPEEDY didn't know Tombstone had escaped. The wagon finally stopped, and he heard one of the men say:

"We can't take this wagon any further, 'cause we can't take chances on tracks. Them Border snoopers might see 'em. We'll walk 'em the rest of the way."

Speedy's first intimation that something had gone wrong with the plans, was when one of the men started cursing the other.

"We had three, and now we've only got two, you blasted bungler!"

"I did so tie him tight! You seen me."

"Yeah, and here's the ropes yuh put on him!"

One of them yanked the gag out of Speedy's mouth, and fairly yelled into

his ear, "Where's yore pardner?"

"Don't ask me," replied Speedy. "Mebbe he went back to get help."

"Yeah? Well, if either of you make a move, I'll blast yuh!"

"Yuh're scarin' me to death," declared Speedy, sitting up in the wagon-box. "Can't we get in out of the rain?"

"We're goin' to untie yore feet, so yuh can walk, but don't try anythin' funny."

"This," sighed Speedy, "ain't no funny situation, pardner."

They got both men out of the wagon, ankle deep in mud. One of them took the discarded gag and tied it over Speedy's eyes.

"No use lettin' yuh see too much," he said, as he yanked the knots tight. "When we finish with you, I'll bet you'll wish you'd told us where that money is."

"Why didn't yuh ask at the bank?"

"Wait a minute! Did you put that money in the bank?"

"I don't know what money yuh're talkin' about but they do have some—I've heard."

"Still bein' comical, eh?"

Whap! The man slapped Speedy so hard that the little cowpoke went flat in the mud. They yanked him back to his feet again.

"After this, keep your mouth shut!" they told him harshly.

"Fine thing," muttered Speedy. "Blindfold a man and then hit him."

One of the men shoved him roughly ahead and they started a long walk in the mud, which ended up inside a building of some sort. The two men went into a conference over the possibilities of handling the situation with their captives blindfolded.

One of the men said, "Aw, let 'em climb down themselves—we can keep 'em covered. You go down first and handle it from the bottom. Light a couple candles down there."

"All right, but if they make a move, blast 'em down."

They took the blindfold off Speedy and he blinked at the candle. It was a small room, unfurnished, the walls discolored by age. Near the center of the floor was a square hole, about three feet across. A square trap-door had been removed. The air smelled dank in the room. Carefully one of the men removed their wrist ropes, while the other, gun in hand, watched closely.

"What's the main idea?" asked Speedy, his hands hanging loosely.

"See that hole?" asked one of the men. "Well, it's twenty-five feet to the bottom. Yuh're goin' down there, feller. Then yuh're goin' to walk miles. We're leavin' yuh where yuh won't bother nobody, and when yuh git ready to tell us where yuh put that money, we'll talk about lettin' yuh loose. See what I mean?"

Speedy made no remarks, but he was allergic to mines. One of the men sat down, his feet over the edge.

"I'll be at the bottom, waitin' for yuh with a cocked gun," he said.

Then he turned around and started down. The other man prodded Speedy with his gun-barrel, and said:

"All right, smart guy! Yuh're next."

"Please, mister," pleaded Speedy tearfully. "Don't make me go down there. I—I can't climb a ladder—I'll break my neck."

"Yea-a-ah! Turnin' yaller, eh?"

Speedy looked down at the flickering candle on the floor, stuck in its own wax.

"Yeah, I'm yaller," he whined. "I believe in ghosts! Look at the candle!"

The masked man looked and, like a striking snake, Speedy hit him square in the mask. Speedy wasn't very big, but he had a punch. It dazed the masked man, drove him sideways, stunned him so badly that he forgot he had a gun. Then Speedy hit him again, but this time he measured his man and hit him with a right punch, square on the jaw, knocking him flat on top of the candle.

INSTANTLY the room was as black as the inside of a tomb. The door was shut, and Speedy didn't know where it was.

The man in the shaft was yelling, asking what was the matter, but no one answered him. Speedy felt around the unconscious man, trying to find that gun. Then he crawled over against the wall, feeling all over the floor, until he found it. The door was open now, and the other captive was running into the night.

The man was coming up the ladder, swearing softly, and Speedy heard him slither over onto the rough boards. The victim of Speedy's strategy was recovering, swearing a little himself. The man at the little shaft whispered:

"What happened? Where are yuh, Pete?"

"I'm here," mumbled the man. "That little sidewinder hit me. My nose is busted and my teeth are all loose. They're gone—both of 'em. Help me up, will yuh?"

"You blasted bungler! How could he hit yuh? You had a gun."

"Gun's gone, too. He—he said somethin' about a ghost, and said, 'Look at that candle!' I—I didn't have a chance. Maybe we can catch 'em. Man, I'm bleedin' like a stuck hog!"

"C'mon," said the other man wearily. "We've done a fine job. I'll cover up the hole and we'll go home. What we git won't be a Sunday sermon."

They banged the door shut and went slopping away in the mud. Speedy didn't care to be alone in a place like that, so he went out and followed them. They made so much noise that they did not hear him. It was raining again. Speedy heard them reach the wagon, still arguing about their loss. Then they argued about which way to go.

"We'll have to go back to the main road," one of them said. "Can yuh see to turn 'em around? Better back up and cramp 'em hard."

"Who's drivin' this team—me or you?"

"All right, do it yore own way—and it'll prob'ly be wrong. Of all the blasted luck! Catch three—and lose 'em all!"

"For two cents I'd ditch the whole works and head for Mexico. I'd do it, too, if I had any money. By golly, I'm goin' back and demand some. Back up, you knot-headed broom-tails!"

"Yeah, and all you'll get is a punch in the nose. And I don't mind sayin' that it ain't pleasant. I know!"

They managed to get the wagon turned around. Speedy got in close, crawled half-way into the wagon, and rode there, his feet hanging. It was better than wading in the mud, and just as safe. The two men on the seat couldn't see him at that distance.

They turned to the right on the main road and sent the horses at a swift trot. Speedy wasn't exactly comfortable, riding over that springless axle, but he hung on and hoped that it would quit raining. They pulled off the main road and into a ranch yard. A light, shaded and dim, was visible in a house near where they stopped. Speedy slipped off and moved aside against a wall.

The men tied the horses to a fence and headed for the house. There was a glow of light, as they went in, and he heard the door close. He could hear muffled voices inside the house, as he carefully scouted the place.

"Speedy Smith, yuh're as crazy as a sheepherder," he told himself. "You ain't got no business here. You don't even know what it's all about. Anyway, this ain't yore job! Yuh're supposed to set quiet in town and wait for Jim Keaton's letter. Gettin' yourself shot, just for fun. No brains. I suppose Tombstone went back to the hotel and went to bed. Well, I'm here now, so I might as well finish the job. Funny country—nobody tells yuh anythin'."

At the rear of the two-story house was a balcony partly covered by the limb of a sycamore tree. It was pretty dark out there, but Speedy felt and clawed his way up to the forks, to where the big limb swayed over the balcony rail. It was slippery going, but Speedy sprawled on the limb and inched his way along until he could locate the balcony rail. After another foot or two he twisted around and let his feet down to the floor. The wood had swelled until there were no creaks left, and he found a window unfastened. Carefully he lifted it and wormed his way inside. He wanted to leave the window for an exit, in case of emergency, but was unable to block it up.

HE GOT down on his hands and knees, crawling carefully, until he was able to locate the door. At least he was able to determine that there was no furniture between the door and the window, in case he needed a swift route of escape. Carefully he unlatched the door, which opened onto a hallway.

He could hear voices now, coming from down in the main room, and the light from a lamp illuminated the stairway. He crawled to the stairway, where he listened. The two men were trying to alibi the escape of their prisoners. One voice caused Speedy to get in closer, where he could get a partial view downstairs.

It was Clement P. Sudbury, the innocent millionaire. "You've bungled things in fine shape, you two!" he was saying. "The three men we wanted—and you lost them! Zibe stole that money, just like I told you he did. He hid it, until, like fools, they jailed me in Agua Verde, trying to force me to draw a check to repay the twelve thousand dollars, when

he made his getaway. Well, the game is about up down here. You can only work our deal just so long in one place. I'm glad that all evidence is gone."

One of the men said, "You ain't crazy enough to think that Ortega was goin' to let you out of Mexico alive, are yuh? You've made him and De Long all the money you can, so you wasn't comin' back."

"Pete, are you sure of that?"

"Don't be silly. You never got that check back, did yuh?"

"Slim said he burned it."

"Yuh're a trustin' soul. He went to the bank, but never tried to cash the check. He told Ortega that there wasn't enough money in the bank to cover it. Ortega's dumb, too. He took Slim's word for it. But you wasn't comin' back here, and Slim was jist lettin' Ortega handle that end of it."

"It looks as though I should be grateful for those two dumb cowboys for saving my life, instead of killing them off."

"You ain't killed 'em yet, yuh must remember."

"Is Slim still in town?" asked Pete.

"Yes. He went on a mission, and I hope he accomplished it. Just between us, I'll be glad to shake the mud of War Dance Valley off my feet. I'm leaving tomorrow and, if you ask me, Clement P. Sudbury will never come back again."

Speedy sprawled there and scratched his damp head. Everything and everybody seemed loco in War Dance Valley. Clement P. Sudbury, part owner of the Atlas Cattle Company was as crooked as the rest of his outfit, it seemed. Evidently he had lied about his reasons for being in jail in Agua Verde. Then the man named Pete said:

"What about the livestock?"

"That," declared Clement P. Sudbury, "is not my job. I asked nothing out of it and got nothing. In fact, I am not interested."

"Slim and Ortega's crazy, if yuh ask me. Drugs and jewels are all right, but livestock is hard to handle."

"The five hundred apiece is an inducement, my boy."

"Poor saps. With the patrol watchin' every road, they ain't got a chance on earth."

"Wait a minute!" snapped the other man. "Somebody comin'!"

A rider drew up swiftly near the front of the house. A moment later the front door was flung open. Speedy craned his neck. It was Slim De Long, muddy, excited. He slammed the door shut.

"Trouble's busted loose!" he blurted. "They took the Kid off a train in New Mexico. They got him cold!"

"How do you know?" gasped Sudbury. "Slim, they *didn't!*"

"They sure did!"

"But—but how do you know, Slim?" Sudbury's voice was husky.

"That blasted Metro got a telegram. He must have wired the officers to get him. I got Metro, but not cold. I heard them two Border bloodhounds, Price and Elton, read it. Metro ain't dead and he's talkin'. I told yuh we'd have to kill him, but you wouldn't."

"I know, I know!" panted Sudbury. "They can trace the Kid."

"Trace him! You fool, they don't need to trace him. Pete, did you two get them other two snoopers?"

"We got both of 'em, and Zibe, too. He was tryin' to force them to tell where they hid that money. Then they—"

"I'm glad they're out of the way. Now, we'll—"

"But they ain't," interrupted Pete. "They all got away."

"You got 'em and lost 'em?" choked Slim De Long. "What next?"

"Well, do something," begged Sudbury. "The next thing we know, it'll be too late."

"Suppose you make a suggestion yourself. Within two hours, we'll be in jail—or in Mexico—broke."

"You may be in Mexico, Slim, but you won't be broke. You cashed that check. I'll take my half of it."

"You'll what? Put that gun down, you poor fool! We're all in the same boat. No use shootin' each other now. We've got to clean up here and get out fast."

Next Issue: Tombstone and Speedy at their funniest and best in STRANGERS IN EL SEGUNDO, another novel by W. C. TUTTLE.

CHAPTER VI

Zibe Has Troubles

BY ILL luck, Speedy must have snuffed some dust from the old rug at the top of the stairway, and he couldn't stifle the sneeze. When Speedy sneezed it was almost a major operation, and Slim De Long whirled.

"What's that?" he snapped. "Somebody sneezed! Upstairs!"

Speedy got to his feet. There was a small, wooden stool against the wall. He grabbed it, intending to fling it down the stairway and hold off pursuit for a moment, but just then a bullet smashed into the wall, only scant inches from his head, and he dived for the doorway of the room where he had gained entry to the house. He heard the front door open, as somebody ran out, possibly trying to cut off his escape, so he guessed at the location of the window and flung the stool crashing through it.

Then he slipped on a small rug, or something on the floor, skidded sideways and hit his head on a bed. Speedy was almost knocked out, but he dimly saw a man enter the room.

"Watch for him outside!" the man yelled. "He dived through the window!"

Then the man ran back down the stairs.

Speedy sat there, rubbing his sore head. In fact, his left eye was fast swelling shut. He could hear voices out in the yard, and someone talking from the house. Speedy was mad and discouraged.

"I ain't got no brains," he complained to himself. "This stuff ain't none of my business. Nobody pays me to get killed. I'll prob'ly lose one eye on this deal. Old One-Eyed Smith, they'll call me. By the time we hear from Jim Keaton, I won't be even second-handed. Just a pile of human junk."

The men were back in the house again, but Speedy wasn't curious. After a while the talking ceased. It annoyed Speedy and aroused his curiosity. He got up stiffly and tip-toed into the hallway. There was a light downstairs, but not a soul in sight. Gripping his gun in his right hand, Speedy went down the stairs. If this was a ruse to trap him, he was going to blast somebody.

But obviously it was no ruse, for the place was empty. Speedy looked it all over.

"I scared 'em out," he decided. "Anyway, they left a fire in the fireplace, and I'm awful wet."

He sat down in an old chair and stretched his boots to the heat. That knock on the head hadn't done him any good, and his one eye was swelled shut. He had taken about three deep breaths, when a voice said:

"Don't move!"

"Who wants to?" asked Speedy soberly.

A disheveled creature, mud-gobbed and wet, moved around into range of Speedy Smith. It was the man they called Zibe. His mask was sagging from around his skinny neck.

"Oh!" grunted Speedy. "It's you again!"

"Uh-huh. Where's everybody?"

"I scared 'em out. What are yuh doin' here, Zibe?"

"Oh, so yuh know me, eh?"

"I ain't proud. Go ahead, speak up."

"I—" Zibe cleared his skinny throat, "I want that money."

"Still hankerin', eh? Why don't yuh close the door? You must have been born in a corral, Zibe. And put away that blasted gun! Anyway, it's full of mud. Look at that barrel, will yuh?"

Zibe looked—and when he looked back, he was staring down the muzzle of Speedy's six-shooter.

"Drop it!" snapped Speedy.

Zibe dropped it, sighed wearily and said, "I ain't got no brains a-tall."

Speedy reached out, hooked the gun with his toe and pulled it over to his chair, where he picked it up.

"Much obliged, Zibe," he said. "That's my gun."

"Yeah, I know. I got it in yore room. It's a better gun than mine. Yuh ain't goin' to shoot me, are yuh?"

"I dunno. My better nature is strivin' for the upper hand. Put some wood on the fire. No use bein' uncomfortable."

Zibe obediently put some more mesquite roots on the fire. He had his back to the fire, facing Speedy, when he looked toward the half-open door.

"Huh—here comes somebody, Smith," he said.

"You walk past me, and I'll turn around, Zibe," replied Speedy. "I'm awful smart thataway."

ZIBE obeyed and Speedy turned. Between them and the doorway stood Tombstone Jones, wet, muddy, hatless, and with blood trickling down his left cheek from a cut on his head. But he had a gun in his hand and determination in his eyes.

"Hyah, pardner," said Speedy quietly. "C'mon in. Holy henhawks, yuh're a mess!"

"Where-at is everybody?" asked Tombstone huskily.

"I scared 'em all away. What happened to you?"

"I dunno," Tombstone drew a deep breath. "I—I came here, lookin' mebbe for you, I reckon. I was out at the back of the house, tryin' to climb up that dad-blamed sycamore tree, when I heard a shot fired. Then somebody—well, I dunno. I heard glass smash, and the next thing I knowed, something hit me on the head and knocked me off the tree. I—I reckon I was cold enough to skate on for a while."

"We all have our ups and downs," said Speedy inanely.

Tombstone Jones looked closely at Speedy.

"What hit you?" he asked.

"Somebody," replied Speedy soberly, "throwed a bed."

"I'd believe that," declared Tombstone. "These War Dance folks is awful capable. Who's yore turkey-necked friend?"

"This is Zibe. He hankers for money. If he'd put on his mask, I'll bet you'd sure remember him. He was Number One."

"Oh, yeah? Him! Why don't yuh say somethin', Zibe?"

"Good evenin'."

"Well, that's somethin'. What's yore job, outside of wearin' masks and pokin' guns at honest folks?"

"I'm the cook here."

"A he-housewife, eh?"

"I have my likes and dislikes," said Zibe firmly.

"And a hankerin' for money," added Speedy. "Tell us about that money, Zibe."

"You got it," wailed Zibe. "I seen that long-geared hombre, so I throwed it away. I know he got it. Aw-w-w, he did so! I want it."

"Was you a-stealin' it, Zibe?" asked Tombstone.

"I took it," replied Zibe firmly. "All they paid me was sixty a month. Never gave me no cut. Don't the Bible say that Gawd helps them that helps themselves?"

"It didn't work out in yore case, Zibe," reminded Speedy.

"What are we waitin' here for?" asked Tombstone.

"Yuh have to stop sometime and git yore breath, don't yuh?" asked Speedy. "Zibe, do you know anythin' about that hole they was goin' to put us into?"

"All I done was the cookin'," complained Zibe.

"Uh-huh. Slim De Long shot that gambler we rescued, Tombstone."

"What for?"

"I ain't sure. Do you know, Zibe?"

"I never heard it. Slim's awful forked. He was a bad boy up in Wyomin'."

"He's a bad boy any old place," declared Speedy. "He shot at me tonight. I was at the top of the stairs and I had to sneeze."

"That was the shot I heard!" exclaimed Tombstone. "Mebbe that bullet— No, it wasn't no bullet. Mebbe he blowed the side out of the house and hit me with it. I dunno. Awful crash. I was about to git myself on the porch, and I woke up in the yard, flat on my back. Jist what are we waitin' around for, Speedy?"

"Waitin' for that letter from Jim Keaton. Don't yuh remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Tombstone caressed his sore head. "Yuh know, Arrowhead City is a right interestin' place in which to kill time."

"Time—and any other stranger who comes along," said Speedy.

"I'll split it with yuh," offered Zibe. "That's fair."

"Allus harpin' about money. Zibe, have you got a horse?"

"I got one tied down at the corral. I dunno who owns it."

"Much obliged. That gives us two horses. C'mon, Tombstone."

The rain had ceased, but it was still very dark. Tombstone got his horse and they went down to the corral fence, where Speedy mounted Zibe's horse. As they swung away from the fence the

yard seemed suddenly to fill up with riders.

"Ride 'em, cowboy!" hissed Speedy Smith.

Ducking low in their saddles they rode straight through the pack of riders. It was done so quickly that there was no chance to block them.

A man yelled:

"Stop, you fellers!"

SEVERAL shots blasted into the murk, but the bullets went wild. The men were off their horses, running toward the house. Zibe threw the front door open, and they piled into the main room.

Sheriff Dan Ewart, Friday Fish, Ed Price and Con Elton, guns ready. They stopped short and looked the place over. Dan Ewart grasped Zibe by the shoulder and shook him roughly.

"Who got away?" he panted. "Who was it, Zibe?"

"Jones and Smith," replied Zibe calmly.

"Jones and Smith!" exploded Ed Price. "What were they doing here?"

"They stopped to git warm, I reckon."

"Where'd they go?" demanded the sheriff.

"You seen 'em start and I didn't, Sheriff. They didn't say."

"Where's De Long, Sudbury—and the others?"

"They wasn't here when I got here. I dunno. Mebbe Arrowhead City. I ain't their keeper."

Swiftly the four men searched the ranch-house, and got together again in the main room.

Friday said:

"Everythin' looks all right, except that a winder has been busted up by the balcony. I think they've got away. Somebody said they seen De Long in town a few minutes after Metro got shot."

"Had we better take this fellow along?" asked Con Elton.

"Na-a-aw, he's only the cook," replied Friday.

They rode away in the darkness. In the dimly lighted doorway stood Zibe, the cook, looking after them.

"Dad-blame it!" he complained. "Only a cook! Stigmatized for life. Well, I reckon I better keep on lookin' for that money. Ain't even important enough to git myself arrested. Fine thing!"

CHAPTER VII

Across the Border

WITHOUT PAUSING, Tombstone and Speedy rode swiftly away from the Atlas ranch, only slowing down when no pursuit showed up. Tombstone said peevishly:

"I don't like this, Speedy. We don't know what it's all about, but everybody takes shots at us, takes us prisoners and all that. Why don't somebody tell us somethin'? I'm gettin' fed up on it."

"Yeah, it's confusin'," admitted Speedy. "Slim De Long shot that gambler tonight. Him and Sudbury almost gunned up each other in the house a while ago but I had to sneeze and ruin everythin'."

"Somethin' hit me," sighed Tombstone. "Hard, too. My head ain't been right since."

"Must have been in early childhood. What'll we do next?"

"You suggest somethin'. My head hurts and I lost my hat, too."

"Yuh know," remarked Speedy, "I wonder where Sudbury and company went all of a sudden. Let's turn off on that mud road and I'll show yuh where they almost put me in a hole."

"I ain't interested in no holes, except the one in my head."

"Aw, that'll fill up in a little while. C'mon, we'll turn off here."

The storm had broken away, and there was some light in the sky. They found where the two men had turned the wagon around in the mud, and from there it was easy to find the old shack.

"He-e-ey!" Tombstone said. "This is the same shack where we found Metro!"

"Yeah, I reckon it is. Wait'll I lift the trap-door."

Speedy managed to lift the thing and they peered into the black depths. Speedy said:

"It ain't over twenty-five feet to the bottom."

Tombstone drew back. "I had one fall tonight," he said.

Speedy found some pieces of candle,

dust-covered, lying on one of the two-by-four braces of the shack. It made better light than half wet matches.

"Shall I go first, or do you want the honor?" he said soberly.

"You—hu-u-uh?" Tombstone stared at Speedy. "Listen, I'm a cowpoke, not a miner. What's down there can stay down there."

"Don't yuh want to find out what this is all about?"

"With the sky over my head, yeah! I ain't no ground-hawg."

"Yuh're a detective, ain't yuh?"

"That's right. Yuh know, my memory ain't what it was. Mebbe we better go back and see if that letter came. After all, we're hired to detect, not jist experiment the way we been a-doin'."

"We might find somethin' down there—somethin' interestin'."

"Huh! Ain't this Spooktown?"

"We're a mile south of Spooktown. I figured that out."

Tombstone rubbed his sore head. "We can't be far from the Border," he remarked. "You ain't seen Ortega, have yuh?"

"I plumb forgot about him. Shall we go down and look?"

"*He* ain't down there, is he?"

"I dunno what's down there. I'll go first."

Speedy lighted another candle for himself, and slid over the edge, working his way slowly down the old ladder. Tombstone waited for Speedy to reach the bottom, and came on down. The tunnel was narrow and not too high. Tombstone had to bend double to keep from bumping his sore head.

The uneven floor was covered with rubble, but they went bravely ahead. The tunnel ran fairly straight for about a hundred feet, and turned sharply to the right. There were noises down there, too, like distant thunder. They reached a short side-tunnel and sat down. Ahead of them the noise increased. Tombstone said: "What's that, Speedy? It's comin' our way!"

"It shore is!" agreed Speedy hoarsely. "Git in here!"

They clawed their way into the short tunnel and put out the candles, listening breathlessly to the oncoming rumble.

"Ghosts!" whispered Tombstone. "Ghosts, and no place to run!"

The sounds were closer now. They could hear the rasp of feet on the rubble. Crouching low, they felt, rather than saw, men filing past—a lot of men. There was not a sound of conversation. Speedy drew a deep breath.

"Th-that was awful!" he whispered. "Like buried souls."

"And we're here, too," breathed Tombstone. "Why didn't we stay where we belonged?"

"I gug-guess so," said Speedy. "Well, they're gone."

"But won't they come back?"

"If they do," whispered Speedy, "we won't be here. Anyway, that bunch is between us and the hole in the shack. C'mon."

THEY went on, their candles guttering. There was another bend in the tunnel, and they thought they heard voices. Tombstone got down on his knees to rest his aching back. Tombstone's candle went out, and Speedy pinched his out. Ahead was a faint glow, and muffled voices.

"More ghosts?" Tombstone whispered.

"Ghosts," said Speedy, "don't need a light."

They went slowly ahead, quietly as possible. The narrow tunnel opened into a big stope, like a huge room. A single candle threw huge, wavering shadows on the rocky walls of the stope. There were three men in there. Their voices were plainer now, and the air stank of powder fumes. A man's voice boomed unnaturally in the rocky room:

"He wanted to blast the tunnels shut, didn't he? I don't go for wholesale murder. They won't have a chance, even if they get outside, but they'll be alive. Anyway, I had a score to settle with De Long."

"And money to collect, eh?"

"That's Pete," whispered Speedy.

"All right, I collected money. Slim double-crossed me, double-crossed Ortega, too."

"Do we get double-crossed, too?"

"Not if you play the game, my friends. You know the way out of here. We can't go back. Mexico is our only chance. You show me the way out, and we split the money three ways. It's little enough, after months of work and worry. Is it a deal?"

"What can we lose?" queried Pete. "I ain't stoppin' at Agua Verde, I'll tell yuh that. Me, I'm going south, until I run into salt water. All right, we'll take

yore deal. Let's go."

They single-filed out of the stope into another small tunnel, and the sound of their footsteps died away, before Speedy and Tombstone went into the stope.

The floor of the stope was covered with broken rock, and most of the rocks were covered with candle-grease. Here they found two one-hundred pound boxes of dynamite, coils of fuse, boxes of detonators. Sprawled near the opened box of dynamite was the body of Slim De Long, foreman of the Atlas spread. Clutched in his left hand were two broken sticks of dynamite, in his other a Colt forty-five. The gun had not been fired. Tombstone took the gun, looked it over and shoved it into his overalls.

"If yuh live by the sword, yuh die by the sword," said Speedy soberly.

"This jigger was shot," said Tombstone. "I wonder why."

"It sounded like he was in the wholesale business, Tombstone."

"Dynamite, huh? I don't like that stuff. It's like the folks of War Dance Valley—yuh can't trust it."

"Well, we might as well keep on goin', I reckon."

They procured longer candles, lighted them and went on. This tunnel wasn't any bigger than the first one. They went on about two hundred feet and came up sharp against a blank wall. They hunched there, looking at each other in the candle-light. "Well, we had a nice walk, didn't we," Tombstone said.

"This is a awful screwy deal," said Speedy soberly. "No wonder that feller needed help in gettin' out of here. We've got to look this over awful—oh-oh!"

The wall about twenty feet beyond them was bulging inwardly. They put out their candles quickly. A man cursed vitriolically, and a second voice completed the profane duet.

"I told yuh we couldn't trust him," wailed a voice. "I've got a bump the size of an aig on my head. How'd I know he was goin' to act thataway?"

"I think my shin is busted, Pete. If I ever git my hands on that dirty crook, I'll— What are we goin' to do now?"

"We're flat busted," said Pete dismally. "We're goin' back to the ranch. There's money in that safe. I know blamed well that Slim didn't get a crack at it. We'll take some of that dynamite and blow it apart, if they ain't already out there, layin' for us. Anyway, I'd as soon be in jail as to be in Mexico—broke. C'mon. We'll find candles in the stope."

SLOWLY they went down the tunnel, cursing their ill luck. When they were far enough away, Tombstone and Speedy started down the tunnel, feeling the walls. It was a heavy canvas curtain, heavy with crushed rock. They didn't dare light candles to examine it. Pulling it outward, they climbed a short slope and came up in a thicket of mesquite. It was good to get into fresh air again. Pale moonlight illuminated the scene now. Not over a hundred feet away was a high, barbed-wire fence.

"The Border, Tombstone!" Speedy said. "We're in Mexico!"

"Yea - a - ah!" breathed Tombstone. "Safe at last!"

"Safe from what?" asked Speedy.

"Yeah, that's right—what? But where are we goin'?"

"In this country, it don't make no difference, there's trouble any old place yuh go. Let's foller this fence to the road. Then we can go down to Agua Verde."

[*Turn page*]

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

"What for?"

"Well, I dunno what for. Mebbe a bowl of *chili*. That old Chinese makes it awful good. The *tequila* ain't bad either."

"You make it sound awful good, pardner. But don't forgit that Mr. Ortega got an awful mad on against us."

"Who ain't? C'mon. We've been wanderin' almost all night—and a little more won't hurt us none. I'm numb all over, anyway."

It was a long walk through the brush along that fence. But they reached the gate and turned south on the road. Agua Verde was little more than a mile below the border, and the road ran not over two hundred feet from the front of the Agua Verde jail. As they came limping into town they saw a lantern near the jail throwing big shadows against the adobe wall. There seemed to be several people going into the place.

"Let's take a peek at durance vile," suggested Speedy.

CHAPTER VIII

Explanations

GOING over to the jail, they sidled in against the wall and made their way to the open doorway. Seated behind his desk was Miguel Ortega, his swarthy face scowling with triumph. Standing in front of the desk was a man, slumped slightly, while behind him stood another man, his rifle at ready. He was one of Ortega's hired gun-men.

"So-o-o, you are fools enough to come 'ere, eh?" snarled Ortega. "You try to snick een, but we are watch for sometheeng. Ha! You dobble-cross me, eh? Me—Ortega! No more. I lose you one times, but Ortega never lose two time.

"You theenk Ortega ees domb, eh? You theenk I don't know sometheeng. Pretty queek I gots the hand on Sleem De Long. I feex heem, too. I feex those Atlas company. Ortega ees hones' pippil, but you crook. Nobody help you now. Kees ourself good-by, Meester Smarts Man. Pancho! Open the cell and keek the carrion eensides."

Tombstone and Speedy sagged inside, guns covering all three.

"Pancho, drop that gun!" snapped Speedy. Pancho dropped it and backed away, his hands up. Slowly Ortega lifted his arms. The prisoner turned.

"Sufferin' sidewinders!" Tombstone said. "Mister Sudbury!"

"Right in the nick of time, boys!" exclaimed Sudbury.

"Keep 'em covered," ordered Speedy. "I'm lockin' Pancho in the cell."

Pancho backed in and the lock clicked.

"But, gentlemen, you do not need to point a gun at me," Sudbury said. "I am an American, too."

"Yuh don't see anybody wavin' a flag, do yuh?" asked Speedy.

Miguel Ortega broke into a torrent of Spanish, but Tombstone said, "Aw, shut up the wailin'. Yuh're only goin' to git what you've got comin'."

"You don' dare shots me!"

"We ain't goin' to shoot yuh—we're goin' to let the Border Patrol have a look at yuh, Ortega. You've been a bad boy."

"Hah! You are a fool, *Americano*. No patrol come 'ere. These ees *Mejico!*"

"Shore is, but you'll end up in the good ole U.S.A."

"You don' dare do heem! That ees against those law. You can't keednaps Ortega. The law say you can't tak' Mexican across those border. W'at you theenk from those, eh? Ha, ha, ha! Stuck, eh?"

"That's the law, Tombstone," nodded Speedy. "Yuh can't take him across the border. Mebbe we better kick him in the pants and call it a day."

Tombstone's lean face broke into a grin. He said:

"Speedy, look in that desk and see if there's two pair of handcuffs in there."

There was. Speedy took them out and handcuffed both Ortega and Sudbury. Sudbury was just a little weak, but Ortega swore by all the gods that he would have revenge for this.

"The law weel feex you!" he wailed. "You—you keednappers!"

"The law," said Tombstone, "ain't worryin' us none."

"Why are you taking me back?" asked Sudbury weakly.

"So yuh can tell us what in the devil this is all about. And we're takin' Ortega back to prove what you say."

"But you can't tak' me across the Border!" declared Ortega. "The law say you don't do heem!"

"Have yuh ever heard of a fine point in law?" asked Speedy.

"I don't know w'at you mean."

"Maybe you'll find out. Put out that lantern, and let's get goin'. Lock the door, and throw away the key."

"My feet are in terrible shape," complained Sudbury.

"There ain't nobody carryin' yuh, pardner. Let's go. And if you let out one yip, Ortega, I'll pistol-whip you."

The lights were out in the one cantina, as they slogged up the road again. It would soon be daylight.

Daylight had broken when Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith came back to Arrowhead City. They were riding double with Ortega and Sudbury. They were a disheveled, dirty quartette as they unloaded in front of the hotel where a crowd of people had gathered. It seemed as though everybody in the town was interested.

No one asked questions—just stared, as they herded their prisoners into the little hotel lobby, which was filled. They stopped short. Most of the floor space was taken up with sitting Chinese, dirty Chinese, chattering shrilly. The sheriff was there, as was Friday Fish, Con Elton and Jim Price, the two Border Officers.

SITTING against the wall, handcuffed together, were Pete and his partner, looking dumbly into the future. Friday Fish yelled: "Heavenly days! Here's Jones and Smith! And if that ain't Miguel Ortega—and Mister Sudbury!"

The two Federal men quickly took over Sudbury and Ortega. The Mexican was explosively complaining. The sheriff said: "We've been lookin' for you two! Where have yuh been?"

"Oh, just around," replied Tombstone. "Here and there—and Mexico. What's happened here, anyway?"

"Where'd yuh git all the Chinese?" asked Speedy.

"They came out of the tunnel," said Friday. "We got 'em. They was smugglin' 'em."

"Them was the ghosts," whispered Speedy. "I git it now. Slim was goin' to dynamite the tunnel in on 'em, but Sudbury shot Slim, and they let the Chinese loose. Sudbury turned out to be quite a feller."

Everyone, including the Chinese, was listening. Price said:

"Maybe you boys don't know it, but this Sudbury is not Sudbury at all, but Frank Adamson, the cleverest counterfeiter in this country. It has taken us a year to run down the source of this funny money. They got scared and sent that kid, supposed to be Sudbury's son, out of the country with all their surplus counterfeit money and all the plates. We took him off the train in New Mexico. But we didn't expect to get Adamson and Ortega."

"So this Adamson killed Slim De Long, eh?" queried the sheriff.

"Oh, shore. Down in the mine."

"Well," said Elton soberly, "I believe we have you two to thank for all this. You saved Tony Metro from them, and let him get the goods on this crooked bunch. You brought Adamson out of Mexico—and I don't know what else you did."

"We got Ortega, too," reminded Speedy. "I heard you wanted him."

"We certainly do. He's been a thorn in our side for over a year."

"He'd shore stick yuh, if he had a chance," said Tombstone.

"Wait a minute," said Speedy. "I've got a hunch that—" He called to the hotel keeper, "Git that box I gave yuh, will yuh?" The box was produced and Speedy cut the strings.

"I ain't sure," said Speedy wearily, "But I think maybe that's the money the Chinese paid them for the smugglin'."

Elton said something to one of the Chinese, and called to Speedy:

"He says it must be twelve thousand, five hundred dollars."

"You count it," said Speedy. "I ain't educated past forty dollars and a few cents."

"Jones, you ought to get your head fixed," said Elton.

"No remarks!" snorted Tombstone. "We done our best."

"Let's go to bed," said Speedy. "I'm all in."

"You've shore earned a rest," said the sheriff. "Thanks."

"Here's a letter for yuh," offered Jim Haley. "Came early in the evenin'."

They took the letter and were halfway up the stairs, when Jim Price called to them. They stopped and looked back.

"Where did you boys pick up Ortega?" he asked.

"Down at Agua Verde," replied Tombstone.

"You did, eh? Don't you realize that the law don't allow you to bring a man back across the Border?"

"We knew that," said Tombstone.

"Then why did you do it?"

"We didn't."

"You didn't? You must have brought him across."

"We didn't. We brought him *under* it."

They went on up to their room and wearily sat down. Speedy opened the letter, which was from Jim Keaton. Speedy read it aloud:

" 'I have a letter from C. P. Sudbury, of Philadelphia. He is one of the owners of the Atlas Cattle Company. In fact, I believe he owns controlling interest in the company, and the Atlas outfit are members of the association. Mr. Sudbury is an invalid and has been for more than a year, unable to walk. He says that his reports from the ranch manager are unsatisfactory, and that his answers regarding business are evasive.

" 'Mr. Sudbury wants a confidential report on the operations, and suggests that the investigator obtain a job with the outfit. That will probably be difficult, in case everything is not being handled honestly. He suggests a man of brains, tact and common sense. I haven't any available men, except you two. May Providence have mercy on the association for my acts. Wire me as soon as you get this letter, and don't wander away again.' "

"Well," said Tombstone soberly, "that explains everythin'."

"What does it explain?"

"What he wants done. 'Course we could get a job."

"Sometimes I look at you and wonder, Tombstone."

"Brains, tact and common sense," enumerated Tombstone slowly. Someone knocked timidly on the door. Speedy went over and opened it, looking out into the dark hallway.

"You—again?" he whispered explosively. "Didn't they catch you?"

"Uh-huh. Guess I wasn't worth keepin', bein' jist a cook."

"Well, the law's got the money. Go home, you blamed pest!"

Speedy shut the door, locked it, and braced a chair under the knob.

"You better telegraph Jim Keaton in the mornin'," said Tombstone. "Jist tell him we're on the job."

FROM ROUNDHOUSE TO MAIN LINE

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Lillis buckled as a bullet tore into him

LUCKY BULLETS

By SCOTTY RAND

When Brad Decker rides into Latigo, he doesn't know that the smoking end of a six-gun will point the way to a gold mine!

THE July sun blazed down on the dusty street of the little cowtown. Beneath the wooden awning in front of the Glad Hand Saloon it was hot even in the shade, as Brad Decker discovered when he leaned languidly against a post.

"The feller who claimed it was hot enough to fry eggs on the sidewalk should have tried this town," Decker muttered to himself. "Providing he likes his eggs well seasoned with dust."

His scuffed batwing leather chaps rustled as he moved restlessly, for the .45 in the holster was heavy against his right leg, and the back of his flannel shirt was wet with perspiration. He was tall and lean, and looked like a man who knew his way around the cow country.

To his ears and nose came the sounds and scents that were usually part of a town, such as Latigo. He could hear the pounding of a hammer on an anvil coming from the blacksmith shop across the street, the thud of hoofs and the creak of saddle leather, and the swish of their tails as the horses at the hitching rail at the side of the saloon tried to get rid of the flies.

FROM beyond the swinging doors of the saloon behind him was borne the smell of stale tobacco smoke, spilled liquor and sawdust. It mingled with the scent of hay and grain that seeped from the feed store next to the Glad Hand, and blended with the smell of dust and heat rising from the street.

Decker glanced behind him as the half doors creaked open and closed again with a protesting wail. The man who had stepped out of the saloon was older than Decker by a few years. He was dressed in range clothes, and he wore no hat. He smiled in a friendly fashion at Decker, who was a stranger in these parts.

"Shore is a scorcher," he said. "If it keeps on like this, folks around here will be complainin' about the warm weather."

"Reckon so," said Decker. "But I've heard tell of places where they really have hot weather. Feller told me he seen a dog chasing a cat and they were both walking." Decker smiled. "I'm Brad Decker."

"Rod Lillis is my name," the other man said. "Quit working for an outfit over south about two months ago and went prospecting." Lillis waved toward the mountains looming off to the north of the town. "There's gold in them hills."

"Have any luck?" Decker's voice was casual for his gaze was on three riders who had just entered the upper end of the single street of the town. "Gold ain't always easy to find."

"I done all right," said Lillis. "Staked me a claim, though I haven't recorded it yet." He frowned in the direction of the horsemen. "Wonder what Lance Horton and them two gunslicks of his want in town?"

"Never havin' seen them before, I couldn't say." Decker's tone was dry. "Who's Lance Horton?"

"He owns the Flying H—biggest ranch in this part of the country," said Lillis. "I worked for him once. He rules the roost around here."

By now the three men had ridden closer to the saloon. Decker's eyes singled out the big, square-faced man with hard eyes who rode in the lead. Up and down the street, citizens of the town were appearing at doors and windows as though expecting trouble of some sort. Evidently the arrival of Lance Horton in Latigo formed the basis for their excitement.

"Been lookin' for you, Lillis," Horton said as he reined his horse close to the porch of the saloon. "Didn't think yuh'd have nerve enough to come back to town after what happened at the Flying H two months ago."

"Meanin' what?" asked Lillis coldly.

The two men with Horton casually rode on past the saloon, wheeled their horses, and stopped. They appeared to be waiting for something.

Decker remained leaning against the post, but he was suddenly wary, for he sensed trouble.

"Let's see that gun yuh're wearin', Lillis," Horton commanded.

"All right." Lillis drew his gun.

He had the weapon half raised when Horton suddenly uttered a wild shout, and his hand streaked to his holster.

"Look out!" Horton yelled, his voice so loud it could be heard across the street. "He's trying to down me!"

The ranch owner fired, and Lillis buckled as a bullet tore into him. He slumped forward, doubled up with pain and then dropped to the rough planking beneath his feet.

Rage swept over Decker as he realized what had happened. To the watching citizens of the town it had looked like Lillis had drawn his gun on Horton and the ranch owner had shot in self-defense. The two gunslicks came riding up and now Decker's gun was in his hand as he stood by the post. He aimed deliberately and Horton howled as a bullet scraped his gun hand and his Colt dropped from his fingers which began to drip blood.

"Get that other hombre!" Horton shouted. "He's trying to kill me, too."

The second man behind Horton fired, the bullet thudding into the post just in line with Decker's head. His gun roared and a slug plowed into the right arm of that second man, whose gun dropped to the dust. The third rider didn't care for such accurate shooting upon the

part of the stranger in front of the saloon, and went away from there fast.

Backing off warily from Decker, Horton and the other man followed him, and the trio rode out of town without looking back. They finally vanished in a cloud of dust on the road beyond Latigo. Up and down the street men appeared from the buildings and began to hurry toward the saloon.

For a moment Decker stared somberly at the motionless form of Rod Lillis. Then he quickly reloaded his gun and thrust it back into the holster. The acrid smell of gunsmoke mingled with the other smells of the town. The dust the three horses had kicked up in the street began to settle.

"And they made it look like Lillis started the whole thing," Decker muttered. "Now why did Horton want to down him?"

Decker walked out beside Lillis, knelt down, and gently turned the wounded man over on his back. To his surprise Lillis was still breathing, though he was badly hurt. He opened his eyes and saw Decker. He tried to smile, but it was a pain distorted grimace.

"Thanks, partner," Lillis said. "Hurt bad. Need pardner—to protect claim. Give you half—if you take care of things for me."

"It's a deal, pardner," Decker said. "I'll do it."

"Good." Lillis closed his eyes.

A crowd gathered, and the wounded man was carried away to the office of the town doctor, after the little gray-bearded physician had examined him. The men of the town said little to Decker and he could see by their attitude that they considered him a gunman who had started the shooting against Lance Horton and his men.

Finally the townspeople drifted away. It was too hot to linger there in the sunlight before the saloon, and Decker wandered back to the shade of the porch. He heard the batwings creak. It was the saloon owner who had come out again after having gone back inside following the shooting. He was a stout bald-headed man in levis, shirt and greasy apron.

"Lance Horton is goin' to hate you," the bartender said. "I seen and heard the whole thing from the window. Come on inside and have a drink."

They went inside and the stout man took his place behind the bar. There was no one else in the saloon.

"What's yore name?" Decker asked the man on the other side of the counter.

"Chester Van Tiller Brook," said the saloon owner. "But nobody ever calls me anything but Tubby. And you?"

"Brad Decker."

"Decker, eh?' Brook frowned. "Heard that name somewhere before, but I can't remember where it was, though. It don't matter." He placed a bottle and a glass in front of Decker. "Have one on the house."

"Thanks."

DECKER heard horses out on the street. He glanced out through an open window in the front of the saloon. Two men had just ridden into town and halted their mounts at the porch of the Glad Hand. One was lean faced, gray-haired and wore a sheriff's badge pinned to his shirt. The other man was younger, husky and light-haired, and he wore a deputy's badge.

"Jed Warren and his deputy, Tom Carter," Brook said, as he saw Decker staring out the window. "Couple of men to ride the river with, if you got a good rowboat and strong oars."

"Crooked lawmen?" asked Decker.

"Not exactly." The stout saloon proprietor shook his head. "Just reluctant when it comes to doin' anythin' that Lance Horton might not like, and there ain't much Horton does like."

"Lillis said Horton was the big boss around here," Decker said.

"Horton says so, but I own this saloon, the feed store and the general store." Brook grinned. "You know, sometimes I don't think Horton likes me much, and the idea makes me plumb happy."

There were footsteps and the jingle of spurs on the boards outside. The swinging doors creaked and groaned as the sheriff and the deputy came in.

"A little oil on those door hinges wouldn't hurt," Decker said.

"That's what you think," said the saloon owner. "I'd rather know there's somebody comin' in when my back is turned."

"This the man who tried to help Lillis gun down Horton and his two riders?" demanded the sheriff staring at Decker. "We met Lance outside of town when we were ridin' in and he wants this

stranger arrested."

"This is the man who shot up Horton and his men," said Brook. "But it was Horton who started the whole thing."

"Thanks, Chester," Decker said.

"You called me Chester!" Brook was beaming. "First time anybody done that in twenty years. A l w a y s Tubby—Tubby!"

"Tubby!" roared the sheriff, who obviously didn't like to be ignored. "What do you mean by sayin' Lance Horton started the trouble?"

"He did," said Brook. "Horton came ridin' into town a little while ago. Lillis and Decker here were standin' out on the porch of the saloon. I was standin' at the window and heard and saw everything that happened."

"Go on, Tubby," said Sheriff Warren quietly. "Then what?"

"Horton rode up. He reined his horse near Lillis and said he didn't think Rod would have nerve enough to come back to town after what happened at the Flyin' H two months ago." Brook frowned. "Then Horton asked Lillis to show him his gun."

"So Lillis drew the gun and from a distance it looked like he was drawing down on Horton," said the sheriff. "That it?"

Brook nodded. Decker looked at the gray-haired lawman in surprise.

"I was afraid of that," said Warren. "For some time now Horton has been gettin' too big for his boots and he wears a size eleven. What happened then, Tubby?"

"Horton hollers that Lillis was trying to down him and he shoots Lillis," said Brook. "Decker shot the gun out of Horton's hand, wounded one of Lance's men and all three of them left town in a hurry. Seems like they remembered they should be somewhere else right away."

"Which was a mistake on Horton's part," said the sheriff. "If he figgered he wants folks to think Lillis started all the trouble, he should have stayed in town."

"Uh-huh." Brook grinned. "But sometimes a man don't think very good when a feller like Decker is shootin' at him." The saloon owner looked intently at the two lawmen. "But just the other day I was talkin' to some of the men in this town. We were all sayin' that no matter what, there wasn't anybody could think Jed Warren wasn't a good sheriff who would do his duty."

"Thanks," said the sheriff dryly. "But what are yuh drivin' at, Tubby?"

"That it's up to a fine upstandin' lawman like you to arrest Lance Horton for attempted murder, and if Lillis dies yuh can leave out the attempted," said Brook. "Don't yuh think so, Jed?"

FOR a moment Sheriff Warren hesitated, then he nodded.

"Reckon yuh're right, Tubby," he said. "I'll ride out to the Flying H and bring in Horton, but provin' it is goin' to be something else again. Folks in town think Lillis was the one who was lookin' for trouble." The sheriff glanced at his deputy, who appeared to be a young man of few words. "Come on, Tom, let's get ridin'."

"We just been ridin'," protested the deputy. "And it's hot."

Warren did not even bother to answer as he started for the door. The two lawmen went out of the saloon, got their horses and rode away. Decker and Brook watched them from the window.

"Funny," said Brook thoughtfully. "Warren sounded like a real sheriff, the way he just talked. But if he brings in Horton, I'll turn over a new leaf and never take any more wooden nickels."

"How far from here is Horton's ranch?" Decker asked.

"Over ten miles," said Brook. "If Warren and Carter really ride out there they won't be back before sundown."

"You know why Horton tried to kill Lillis?" demanded Decker.

"Shore," said Brook. "Lillis worked for the Flyin' H some months back. He quit and decided to go huntin' gold. Didn't anyone hear anything of Lillis for a couple of months, not until he rode into town yesterday and said he'd made a strike back in the hills."

"I know," said Decker. "Lillis told me that."

"Soon as Horton heard about it he claimed Lillis hadn't really quit the Flying H. Horton said he fired Lillis because he caught him stealin' some money out at the ranch. Since, according to Horton, that money had been used to grubstake Lillis, he says he figgers he ought to have a half interest in Lillis' claim."

"You think Lillis really stole the money?"

"Of course not," said Brook impatiently. "Horton didn't even think up that story until after Lillis discovered gold. I got Lillis's horse and pack mule out in back of the saloon. Wonder how he is gettin' along?"

"I'll go see," said Decker. "Where's the doctor's office, Chester?"

The saloon owner went to the door with Decker and pointed out the doctor's office which was down the street a ways. Decker found old Doctor Nash in his office and asked about Lillis.

"He's badly wounded but he'll live," said the doctor. "I had to operate in order to get the bullet out. He kept raving about his partner and something about finding map in hat in saddle roll on roan. Doesn't mean a thing to me."

"It does to me," said Decker. "I'm Lillis' pardner. Take good care of him, Doc."

Decker went back to the saloon and told Brook what he had learned.

"Let's go see if we can find the map," said the saloon owner.

The stout man led the way out in back of the saloon. Evidently Lillis had been planning to leave town for his roan was saddled and there was a pack on the burro, loaded with prospecting equipment. Decker and Brook looked in the saddle roll and found Lillis' battered old hat. Inside the inner band of the hat was a neatly rolled map.

"That's it, all right," said Brook. "Lillis was smart enough not to tell anyone where his strike was located—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Decker. "If that's so, why did Horton try to kill Lillis? How did Horton figure he was goin' to find the gold strike with Lillis dead?"

"You got something there." Brook frowned. "What's the answer?"

"Maybe Horton and his men backtracked Lillis and found the claim," said Decker. "It was raining yesterday morning for a while, enough to leave the ground soft, and you said Lillis came into town yesterday."

"That's right," exclaimed Brook. "Yuh're smart, Brad. Lillis' horse and burro left plenty of tracks, I'll bet. Horton and his men or maybe just Horton himself, followed those tracks back to Lillis' claim. Once he knew where it was located, Horton figgered Lillis was more use to him dead than alive."

"Just what I'm thinkin'," said Decker. "But why didn't Lillis register his claim as soon as he got here in Latigo?"

"Because there's no place to do it in this town," said Brook. "Nearest place to register a claim is Festival, fifteen miles south of here."

"Then as Lillis' pardner it is up to me to guard that claim," said Decker. "I better get there, pronto."

HALF an hour later Decker had started out for the gold claim, riding his own horse and leading Lillis' burro that carried the prospecting equipment. He had removed the leather chaps that he had worn over his levis.

Sundown found Decker back in the foothills. He camped there until morning, cooked and ate his breakfast and then went on. Around noon he finally found Lillis' claim. The wounded man had stuck up a post with "R. Lillis, Claim," printed on it in crude letters.

"So this is it," said Decker as he glanced around him. Then he took out the map and looked at it out of curiosity. "That's right, just where Lillis said it would be."

As Decker heard a crackling in the brush and trees to his left, Decker reached for his gun. He was still holding the open map in his left hand. From the brush a gun roared and a bullet tore a hole through the map. Decker fired at almost the same instant. He heard a moan of pain and then Lance Horton staggered into view, blood on the right shoulder of his gray flannel shirt. The ranch owner's clothes were torn and he looked wild. He was holding a gun in his left hand. His right was bandaged.

"Figgered yuh would come here, and I swore I'd get you!" he shouted. "That fool sheriff came to the ranch last night and tried to arrest me for attempted murder—me, Lance Horton! Warren and his deputy downed two of my best men, but I got away. They're still lookin' for me. Now I'm goin' to get you. I'll teach yuh who rules the roost around here!"

Horton raised his gun and aimed at Decker's heart, even though he was covered by the other man's Colt. The two guns roared at the same time. Decker felt as though his left shoulder had been touched by a red hot iron as a bullet seared it. He saw Horton fall and knew that the man was dead by the way he sprawled there in the brush.

"Greed killed him," Decker muttered. "Nothing but that. The owner of the biggest ranch in this part of the country and he goes around killin' folks just to get a little gold claim. Reckon he was a little loco over gold."

Decker turned as he heard the sound of horses' hoofs and watched the sheriff, his deputy and the stout saloon keeper come riding up.

"We saw what happened," Brook said as the three men reined their horses near Decker. "The sheriff came back to town lookin' for Horton last night. I told him that you had gone to the claim and Horton knew where it was located so we rode out here."

"Looks like yuh saved the Law some trouble, Decker," said the sheriff, staring at the dead man. "Lillis is much better. He was sitting up and askin' for his partner when we left town."

"You did a good deed when yuh got rid of Horton," said Brook. "He didn't have any family and one of the other ranchers will probably buy the Flyin' H now. Reckon it will be more peaceful around here after this." The saloon owner frowned. "There's just one thing I been wonderin' about, Brad. What brought you to Latigo in the first place?"

"Simple." Decker smiled. "I was broke and out of a job and figgered maybe somebody around these parts could use a hand. That's why I came here, Chester. Funny, but them bullets that were fired at me and Lillis shore were lucky to me!"

Headliners in the Next Issue!

GUNS flame in El Segundo the minute Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith get there—in next issue's exciting and entertaining featured novel, STRANGERS IN EL SEGUNDO, by W. C. TUTTLE. It's a slam-bang yarn of a murdered banker, a gang of rustlers and some mighty odd ventures into occult science—and it all adds up to one of the best Tombstone and Speedy tales W. C. Tuttle has ever written! Look forward to a grand reading treat.

UNTIL the stage he was on was held up by masked men, Ridge Sampson didn't know that there was a conspiracy to part him from his money. Sampson shot it out with the bandits, and from one of them, who was dying, he learned who had planned to rob him—and why. Ridge had friends in Yellow Rock, but he also had plenty of enemies—including Cab Cantrell and his hired hyenas—and what hurt most was that he was regarded by some as a long-looper. The showdown is not long in coming in Hal White's smashing novelet, POWDER ON THE PECOS, coming next issue! And there's slug-slamming excitement on every page!

NOBODY went into Priest's Gulch without expecting trouble—but Slim Clem Riddle was headed there. "Putting my neck in a noose," he muttered as he approached the settlement on Butter Milk Creek. "And all over a woman with yellow hair!" Riddle was in special danger, for he was an ex-deputy and all the renegades in Priest's Gulch were primed to kill him on sight. But he had a fast hand with his ivory-stocked gun, and he was ready to trade bullet for bullet with them in MAN-BAIT FOR A GUN TRAP, by T. W. FORD, a novelet next issue which packs plenty of six-gun action thrills!

SHORT stories of exceptional quality by some of your favorite authors, plus departments of interest, round out the next issue—an issue filled with swell reading from cover to cover. Remember to be on hand for a number you'll not forget in a hurry.

Nord clubbed down with a short, choppy blow of his gun

BOOT HILL BAIT

By J. R. JACKSON

Two plus two usually equals four—but one stormy night it gives Sheriff Nord a killer's number, and it means six-guns!

SHERIFF Pete Nord scowled at the vicious thunderclouds rolling up over the Border from Mexico. Bad luck had tailed him from the start in this man-hunt. First off, he heard the news of Joe Dister's break a week after it happened. Second, the dirty skunk would have to head back for his territory. And now a good hard rain threatened to wash out whatever sign might be around.

Sheriff Nord's stomach rumbled loudly in protest.

"I'd give a month's pay right this minute for some of Grandma Gonzales' cookin'," he muttered dismally.

He had taken his last meal at sun-up, ten hours earlier. Now, on top of a growling hunger, he faced a long, wet ride back into the town of La Plata.

Topping an eroded ridge, Sheriff Nord spied the murky, slow-moving Rio Grande, looking silver under the storm clouds. He though of Joe Dister and cursed softly. In all Nord's long, hard-hitting career no criminal had done more to make his life a perdition or splotch his reputation for efficiency than Dister.

Now the vicious rustler had broken out of the state prison as though he had only consented to stay there for a short rest, and he had been reported in this country only two days before by a frightened cowman who had not dared to challenge him. Yes, Dister was back to renew his stealing from Mexican and American alike, and to sell wherever he could turn a quick, dishonest dollar.

Nord whirled his mustang, and the pony looked back at him as though in protest against the unnecessary roughness. Riding ahead, the sheriff caught sight of the small, dirty adobe of Tono Gonzales. It was a chance to grab a bite to eat, but on the other hand it would delay his ride back, and the quick-gathering storm would break soon.

"Ah, I might as well eat," Nord muttered in disgust. "I'm going to get soaked either way."

He pulled up in front of the little hut.

"Hola!" he yelled.

There was no answer. He was surprised to see the door closed and the one small window firmly shut. Things were quiet about the place—too quiet. He felt a sudden flutter of suspicion and

climbed off his horse.

"Hey, Tono," he yelled. "It's me—Pete Nord."

THERE was still no answer. Nord knew that Tono Gonzales was a leather puncher who did his work here in his home. It was very unlike him to go off and leave the place unguarded, for it was full of his finished work and raw leather supply. Anybody could have broken in and carried off a thousand dollars worth of elaborately worked leather.

The sheriff banged loudly on the door. "Tono—open up!"

There was a stirring inside the adobe. Nord eased his gun out and waited tensely. Someone came up to the door then, but did not open it.

"What is it?" a voice called. It was plainly that of Tono Gonzales.

"It's me—Sheriff Nord. What's going on in there?"

The young, overalled Mexican opened the door a crack and peeked out. He showed no sign of friendliness.

"I am tired," he said. "I can do no work today. Please go away."

The curt tone of the man angered Nord. He started to retort hotly, but checked himself. After all, he had no right to break into Tono's home if Tono did not wish it. But the young leather worker was acting mightly peculiar and it made the sheriff more suspicious than ever.

He was determined to look inside the adobe.

"Listen, Tono I ain't eaten since dawn. Can yuh spare some grub to get me into town? I'll pay yuh."

"There is little food in the house," said the Mexican. "I cannot help you, Nord."

"Anything at all yuh got," persisted the sheriff. "I'll send supplies out to yuh tommorow if yuh're cleaned out."

"Come in then," said Tono in a surly voice, and with an angry gesture he flung open the door and admitted his unwelcome visitor.

Nord dangled his gun negligently at his side. He sent piercing glances around the place before he sat down.

"All I've got are cold tamales," said Tono ungraciously, taking the lid off a painted Mexican bowl. "Help yourself."

"Anything'll be better than riding back empty," grunted Nord.

He began to eat, watching the young Mexican guardedly. Tono was obviously displeased to have him there. He had made no bones about it not even offering to warm up the food. The small chimneylike alcove in which Tono did his cooking was draped off from the rest of the one room adobe, by a colorful blanket.

"I guess yuh heard Joe Dister is out," said the sheriff suddenly.

Tono nodded sullenly.

"My grandmother wrote me about it."

"Your grandmother wrote yuh about it?" Nord continued eating stolidly. "I see. There ain't no need to warn yuh then to be careful?"

"Dister won't bother me," blurted the Mexican excitedly. "He's probably far into the interior of Mexico by now."

"Yuh were the only one actually saw him throw that Bar Y herd across the Grande. Yore testimony alone sewed up what was otherwise a weak case against him. He might remember that."

Tono laughed sarcastically.

"Joe Dister is far too busy to bother me. He knows I did only what the law required me to do. I cannot be blamed because the court required me to give evidence."

"That evidence got Dister fifteen long years in prison." The sheriff eyed the Mexican coldly and stopped eating. "Dister ain't the kind of man to forget that."

"You make a mountain out of a molehill," cried Tono angrily. "I have already had far too much trouble about the case. Please do not talk of it. I want to hear nothing more of Dister. It wearies me."

"All right, Tono." Nord got up and swatted his sombrero against his dusty levis. "It's yore hide. I'd be mighty careful of strangers though if I was you—especially after dark."

The Mexican frowned in annoyance.

"Yes, yes, Nord," he said impatiently. "But I have heard enough talk. I am very tired, as I have already told you. Will you now please go?"

Nord walked to the door and slowly turned around. He drew the string taut under his chin with a quick jerk that made his hat too snug.

"Can I pay yuh for the grub?" he asked.

"It is not necessary," said Tono coldly.

WALKING over, Tono closed the door almost in the sheriff's face. He swung around then and leaned back against the door, breathing noisily. There were a few moments of silence before the blanket sealing off one corner of the hut parted. A chunky, heavily bearded man stepped from behind the blanket, firmly holding a black six-gun.

"Get away from that door," ordered Joe Dister.

The Mexican obeyed. He walked to the crude table in the middle of the hut and waited.

Dister put his ear to the door. Satisfied, he swung around.

"Good thing for that cussed lawman yuh did what I told yuh."

"He is my friend," said Tono simply.

A crashing roar of thunder and a pelting rain betokened the start of the storm. Simultaneous streaks of lightning and peals of thunder seemed to split the heavens so that a driving rain could splatter over the earth. Dister made an ugly grimace at the noise of the storm and moved into the middle of the room.

"I'll wait out the storm here," said Dister. He made an abrupt gesture toward the empty dish. "Get me something to eat."

"After the storm, what?" asked Tono.

"Why, after the storm—"

Dister didn't finish. His bearded lips parted in a hideous smile, and he raised his gun and balanced it on the palm of his hand.

Tono needed no other words. Dister's meaning was plain. When the storm was over and he could ride, Dister would kill the young Mexican who had testified against him at his trial.

With a little shrug Tono moved off for more food.

A terrible peal of thunder roared over them and, at the same instant, the door burst open. Nord charged inside fast, shouting for Dister to surrender. Dister's gun exploded and simultaneously he dropped to the floor behind the shelter of the table.

Nord hurled himself atop the table and it splintered to the floor in a shattering crash. Dister's gun was fired so close to Nord that the powder singed his cheek. Nord clubbed down with a short, choppy blow of his gun and Dister's yell told him he had scored. He dragged the criminal to his knees, helpless but still conscious.

"How did yuh know," groaned Dister. "How could yuh possibly know. I was listenin'. I was set to kill yuh both if he breathed a word."

Sheriff Nord grinned at the Mexican, who smiled bashfully. The lawman well knew the debt of gratitude he owed Tono for playing his hand so skillfully when both their lives had been in danger. He looked back at Dister.

"Yuh didn't hear Tono tell me, Dister. But Tono told me just the same."

"How could he?" grunted Dister in disbelief.

"When I asked Tono if he'd heard of yore escape, he told me his grandmother had written him about it. Yuh see, I know Tono's grandmother. She's my cook and housekeeper."

Dister stared, his bearded mouth agape.

"I write her letters," grinned Sheriff Nord. "She can't read or write a word. Therefore the only way Tono could have known you had escaped was by getting that fact direct from you yoreself."

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NOW ON SALE AT ALL STANDS

THE STEEL TRAIL

By NELS LEROY JORGENSEN

Cimarron Kirby hurls himself into a grim feud between cattlemen and railroaders—bucking savage opposition from every quarter!

CHAPTER I

Six Against Two

FROM a distance he could not be sure just what was going on but, as Cimarron Kirby reined in his lean paint pony, that he disapproved of it, he was firmly convinced. Six men with drawn guns were facing one man who stood at bay against a background of catclaw cactus, shrub oak and gnarled and withered bitter pinon, where the end of the shining new rail line ended upon a patch of yellow sand.

Just at the end of the rails, near a dried-out stream-bed, loomed a dismantled engine and its trailing caboose, looking forlorn and abandoned.

The slender man angrily confronting the mounted men was clad in breeches and boots, and a wide hat topped a straw-thatched head. At his side was a man, evidently his companion of a moment before. Now this man was lying prostrate and twisted on the hot sand.

Smoke was issuing from a small fire nearby and seeping from the wooden work car attached to the abandoned engine. In the distance, eastward rails stretched but ended right here.

A faint yell caused Cimarron Kirby's gray eyes to narrow slightly. Automatically his hands brushed against the Colt .44s at either thigh. He looked dusty and worn from long and arduous traveling.

His spurs gently touched the paint. Kirby rode down into the fracas.

The twisted rails which broke off so suddenly just here, told him their own story. He knew little of engineering but realized that the steel trail would end here forever because there was no more steel to carry it further and no more guns to guard its progress.

Caboose and engine alike showed they had been abandoned for days. Stark and forlorn, they were mute monuments to a thwarted project of man, against the alkali-bitter and relentless plain.

Kirby was unnoticed until he had almost reached the center of the scene. Then one man looked up and saw him, paused in the act of bringing a long-handled ax down on a large cask labeled Kerosene. A second man, turning slowly, saw him, and he was the one Kirby knew he had to contend with.

Kirby spared scarcely a glance for the man in riding clothes, or the man stretched on the ground. His gray eyes noted a rope hanging over a nearby cottonwood limb. He fixed the big barrel-chested leader with his cool stare.

"It looks like a party," Kirby said. "Can anybody horn in? I just happened to be passin' by."

THE blond man in riding breeches uttered a startled ejaculation. The tall bearded man cursed.

"We don't need help," he spat out. He jerked a dirty thumb past his matted black whiskers. "That's the way to town. Reckon yuh must 've missed it!"

Kirby did not move in the direction indicated. He nodded.

"Thanks. I'll take it when I'm ready." He turned to the blond-haired man, who was white-lipped with frustrated fury. "S'posin' you tell me, amigo," he suggested.

The man in riding breeches pushed back a wide-brimmed hat.

"My name's Hume—Dale Hume," he said. "I'm chief surveyor and acting engineer for this rail line. The man there on the ground is, or was, my helper, Ned Franck." He made a defiant, contemptu-

At Kirby's second shot, the horse came to a halt and the rider went catapulting over its head like a sack of oats

A NOVELET OF THE FRONTIER

ous gesture. "These hombres here they don't like the notion of a rail spur comin' in to Resaca."

"Its comin', then," Kirby mused out loud.

"The spur is," Hume said impatiently. "So they began to tear up what tracks we had laid, about an hour ago, when Franck and I were just getting here, dismantled our one engine, started work on the sleepers. Franck got in their way. So did I. I think that they also planned to use that cottonwood!"

KIRBY nodded, watching the bearded man who was obviously the gang's leader.

"He's Tip Garrity, segundo for Calhoun in these parts," Hume said. "Val Calhoun hands out Garrity's orders. Calhoun's holdin' up the rail supplies supposed to replenish our stock here." He pointed to a ratty-looking man wearing a scraggly mustache. "That other fellow is Tim Greb, who's plenty free with his shootin'-irons."

Greb looked flattered and Kirby glanced at the twin guns in Greb's holsters. The man seemed capable of anything.

Kirby looked them all over and they, in turn, looked him over and nobody, after seeing his eyes and the easy, insolently languid way he sat his saddle, made a move toward a firearm.

"Heard about this rail spur," Kirby drawled thoughtfully. "Mebbe the news was premature. Resaca's a good two-three miles off from this spot."

His eyes brooded over the broken line of steel.

"This is as far as it'll get, if Val Calhoun has his way," Hume said angrily. "Rails mean law comin' into a country, and Calhoun don't hanker for any law. Garrity and Greb run things for him!"

"Calhoun? Val Calhoun?" Kirby let a free hand caress his lean jaw. "Mebbe you gents never heard of me."

Surprisingly Tip Garrity spoke up. "Don't gallop off with that idea, Kirby! Calhoun knows yuh. In fact, he's expectin' yuh back and wants to talk with yuh. But they ain't goin' to like yuh interferin'."

Kirby looked mildly surprised. "So I'm known! After almost two years in Durango!"

Hume appeared surprised. "Then you're that Kirby—Cimarron Kirby!" he ejaculated. "Own the Anchor Cross spread. The man they say—"

"All of that, probably, and more," Kirby said. "Yuh see, Hume, happens I had to cut a man down here just before I trailed out. I had to hit out right sudden. Yore boss 'd know—or mebbe his niece."

Hume gave a start. "You—you know Henry Ringbold?"

Kirby nodded. "And the niece too, though she don't think so much of me. Ringbold's a rail man but he wanted a ranch and so he had to come to me to buy up a small property I got by default." Kirby did not add that the "default" was the result of a poker game from which he had emerged victorious. "Yeah. But, you see, this railroad spur is a concern of mine, since I own property here, so I thought I'd drift back and take a look-see."

Hume stared, then shrugged and indicated the torn-up tracks and the battered, disabled engine.

"You've seen!" he said bitterly. "Calhoun doesn't want the line and so I guess that's the end of it." He bent over the man on the ground, who was beginning to stir and rub his jaw, from which blood dripped.

Hume got a large canteen and held it to Franck's lips. Franck's eyes came open and he groaned.

The lynching party looked on disinterestedly, sneaking glances toward Kirby who was watching speculatively.

HUME was an unusual type, a single-idea man. Hume had not cared a lot, he suspected, whether or not his life was in danger.

It was his precious rails that concerned him.

Kirby said in a gentle voice, "Looks like mebbe this party's over, gents. Who's sheriff in Resaca now?"

Hume said, without turning his head from his ministrations, "Rafe Longstreet. His deputy's Val Calhoun's man, name of Walt Breen."

Kirby grinned in comprehension. "Yeah. They couldn't keep Breen out of jail when I was here last. I suspect our friend Calhoun put him into Longstreet's office. Longstreet mebbe got tired of Calhoun's work."

"That's about it," Hume agreed, and went on with his task.

Two riders were approaching over the

Greb gave vent to a startled cry as his gun exploded harmlessly and he fell back in his saddle

undulating terrain from the direction of town.

Kirby noted them, then swung back just in time. Greb's gun was edging out of its holster while he was making pretense of soothing his tall sorrel.

Kirby's smile faded. Hardly anyone could see his right hand move. But a gun was somehow in it and it spoke—twice, as Greb's pistol came clear of its sheath.

Greb uttered a startled sound. His .45 exploded harmlessly, and he fell back in his saddle as though he had been knocked back by the blow of a fist. Garrity cursed and wheeled to catch his companion.

KIRBY'S two guns were now out and they covered the gang. His expression had not changed.

"That was a long shot, gents," he said. "Never too healthy. Garrity, I'd suggest that you hold him in the saddle and get him back to town. That way I reckon you won't be tempted to reach for yore gun either. You can't tell—he might live."

The posse was silent. Hume stood up at last.

Without a word the wreckers now quietly gathered themselves together and men ranged on either side of Greb to support him.

Hume watched wordlessly as they rode off.

At last he turned.

"They're scared of you, Kirby," he said without emotion. "They won't stop."

Kirby eased his guns into their holsters. "Neither will I," he said. "Let's see if we can prop that friend of yores onto a horse and ease him into town. Ah-ha! Looks like we got company."

Hume turned toward the two riders angling in from a new direction—a tall man clad in spotless linens and shining boots, and a girl in levis and gay silver spurs, her dark hair unruly under her big white hat.

"It's Cynthia," Hume said, his voice almost reverent. "Cynthia Varick. Ringbold's niece."

"I know," Kirby said, and his eyes were blank.

CHAPTER II

Not for Hire

MORE than eighteen months had elapsed since Kirby had last seen Cynthia Varick. Orphaned in the East, she had come out with her uncle, her mother's brother, when Henry Ringbold had purchased ranching property outside Resaca, which was at a junction point of the spreading railroad system. Ringbold was an executive but not an active one. However, his railroad interests in Chicago and Kansas City made his present location a strategic one. His farseeing gaze had been fixed for a long time on the expansion of the western rail system and he had settled on Resaca as an ideal location for a spur length of track which would become a vital part of the main line eventually, catering to the needs of cattlemen and stock shippers of the territory.

But rails inevitably brought law in their wake and this was raw country. Law always followed the shining lines of steel. This was why the coming of the rails was fought by an element that had waxed mighty in the days of a lawless frontier.

The spur had been only a matter of speculation when Kirby had last seen his home range and his small spread. In those days he had borne a reputation for hot-headedness and recklessness. This had brought him into disfavor after the death of his father. He had left after a brawl in which an out-of-town gambler had met sudden death from Kirby's flaming guns, but he did not dispose of his property.

At the time it had been more politic to erase himself from the scene of violence, even though he was adjudged not to blame. Still, the more level-headed element held to the belief that young Kirby had too wild a temper. A terrific pistol-whipping which he had administered to a cowpuncher for mistreating a horse had confirmed this opinion.

When the affair had blown over, Kirby remained where he was, employed in the purchasing of Mexican beef for a Sonora mining project where a man had to be handy with guns and alert to treachery. He had made himself another reputation southward.

But with the news of the rail spur coming to Resaca, he had remembered his home. He had remembered, too, a tawny-skinned girl, home on holidays from a ladies' seminary in San Antonio, a girl who disapproved of his reputation. Cimarron Kirby had saddled up and taken leave. He had tried in vain to forget. He was well aware, also, that her uncle, Ringbold, likewise viewed him with disfavor.

In the interim, Dale Hume had come on the scene, a sound, well-educated man.

Now Hume was moving to meet the nearing riders. Kirby bent over Franck, who was wiping blood from his lean face. Kirby gave him some brandy from a small flask. Franck looked at him in bewilderment.

"I'm a friend, and it's all over now," Kirby murmured.

The linesman drank again. "You must 've helped," he said. "Needed some kind of help. Thanks." He was a burly man, heavy in the shoulders and hips, slightly bearded. "'Less we can get a skeleton crew and some new supplies, reckon this option's finished right now."

"Option?"

"Certain! We got to git through to Resaca before the end of next week."

Kirby comprehended. The spur needed supplies, men, and protection against raids or violence. Meanwhile Val Calhoun held all the strength here. Val Calhoun didn't want civilization and he could summon power to halt it. Ned Franck regarded the wreckage about them with somber, bloodshot eyes.

"They done most of their dirty work today, before you come along," he said. "Carted off a load of spikes last night, set fire to a mound of ties, tore up the steel where it hurts most. Doubt if we can patch up that engine." He stared sadly at the locomotive.

Kirby nodded. "Let's see can we get you on a hoss," he suggested. "I'm going on into Resaca anyhow."

Franck, one eye on the approaching riders, by dint of clawing at a saddle horn, managed to climb astride of the bay. Hume had now greeted Cynthia Varick with her uncle.

"Ringbold don't like failures," Franck opined. "He pays high—but not for mistakes."

As Kirby and Cynthia Varick approached each other, they gave no sign of recognition. Kirby's face was like a mask.

CYNTHIA VARICK was slender and lovely in the saddle. She had brown eyes with flecks of gold in them. Her figure was slender yet womanly. Dusky short hair, like a cloud, caressed the back of her smooth white neck.

Her eyes were not friendly, even though she had been talking gaily with Hume before Kirby and Franck rode up. Her cold gaze looked past them at the smoking wreckage of the locomotive and the twisted agony of the rails.

Ringbold was a burly, powerful man with the air of an executive and commander. A close-cropped mustache shaded his tight lips and his eyes were uncompromising. The railroad interests in the country had brought him wealth, and power, and he was Dale Hume's employer.

Cynthia Varick barely acknowledged Kirby. "Yes, I believe I know Mr. Kirby," and her uncle's look was rapier sharp. Yes, they all knew Kirby.

Hume told about the disaster to the spur of track.

"Yes, something was due to happen," Ringbold said. "Didn't want Cynthia to get mixed in this but she insisted on taggin' along. So they wrecked the loco and tore up about quarter of a mile of steel, eh?"

Ringbold's eyes stared across the open space and he seemed oblivious of the others. Kirby had the impression that here was a man who saw a lot more than most. An empire builder, with visions. Yet right now he must be well aware of the handicap he worked under, and the crucial time element that was against him.

Soon his gaze returned to Kirby. "You come back to the home range at a strange time, Kirby," he said.

Kirby stared back at him.

"I returned because I have interests here and I wanted to see what effect this spur of yores is going to have on them," he said.

"And just what have you figured?"

"That there won't be any spur."

Ringbold's face hardened. "There will be," he said grimly. "You don't like railroads?"

"I think the spur will be a great thing for cattlemen," Kirby answered in even tones. "I'm a cattleman."

Ringbold looked at the sagging guns he wore.

"Then you're on the rail side."

"I'm on the cattleman's side." Kirby's lips curled. "I know what you're thinkin'. The other side could mebbe use my guns. And you have yore suspicions of me. *Bueno!* I'm still on the side I see best."

"Maybe those guns of yours aren't enough to solve things, Kirby," Ringbold said.

"Guns'll never solve anything—by themselves," Kirby countered. "But such as they are, mine are my own, and not for hire."

He danced his pony and made a swift motion in the girl's direction.

"Sorry, I've got to get along," he said. "Nice seein' yuh again, Cynthia. *Adios —y hasta la vista!*" He rode away alone. He would attend to Franck.

It didn't surprise Kirby that Ringbold had not praised him for interfering with the wrecking party. Ringbold distrusted him.

It was logical for the rail promoter to assume that he had returned to sell his guns to the highest bidder, and the highest bidders were the lawless crowd.

Hume? Kirby put him from his mind. That Hume was in love with Cynthia was more than apparent. It was also understandable. Cynthia was beautiful and wealthy, and their material interests were the same. Besides, Hume was a zealot.

Kirby didn't like complications. He rode on, letting his pony choose his own pace, anxious to survey the situation. It was a long time since he had seen Resaca, a sleepy little cattle town at the edge of the desert. Once he had been adjudged too tough for it. Resaca, it seemed, had caught up and gone past him!

Resaca's main barroom and rendezvous, it boasted of three these days, was the Matador. After stabling his mount, Kirby repaired to the Matador which was sprawling, rough and lively. There were a half dozen dancing girls inside and the bar was long and somewhat pretentious for this territory. The place was well filled. Garish kerosene lamps

hung from the ceiling and a tin-panny piano was jangling out current tunes.

Kirby ordered a whisky and, when he had poured it, let the glass stay in front of him. He didn't want a drink. He wanted to see mostly what would happen. It happened.

THE first person who accosted Kirby was the sheriff. Behind Rafe Longstreet, aging now, trailed his deputy, Walt Breen, who was due to take over after the next county elections, with the backing of Val Calhoun.

From then on Calhoun would have a free hand.

Longstreet was an honest man but he had held the job too long. Breen had been swung in as his deputy during an illness, and had stayed on. Longstreet apparently had not summoned the stamina to force him out.

Kirby shook hands with Longstreet. The sheriff had a lengthy white mustache that sagged away below his pointed chin, and a small goatee as well. He carried only one gun and he looked slantwise at Kirby's pair.

"Heard yuh come back, Cim," Longstreet said. "Why all the guns?"

"Might need 'em. Nothin' new?"

"We're thinkin' of makin' folks turn in their shootin'-irons when they hit town," Longstreet drawled. "No action on it yet though. Th' town's gettin' a mite too ornery. Say, meet my new deputy, Walt Breen."

Breen had bulk and size, and one down-drawn eyelid. He didn't offer to shake hands.

"Heard about this feller, Sheriff," he said across Kirby's chest. "Gets in the way sometimes, so I been told."

Kirby glanced at him indolently. "Been told? By Val Calhoun mebbe?"

"Mebbe." Breen looked his hostility.

Longstreet cleared his throat. "You ought to know Calhoun, Kirby. Might get to like him."

Kirby merely grinned. "Any odds against me here, Sheriff?"

Longstreet studied him out of his pale eyes.

"Not yet, Cimarron. Not yet. Only that reputation of yourn ain't improved since yuh went away."

"I've come back to stay, Rafe," Kirby said steadily. "I hope you'll remember that. My ranch is here. I hear tell there's a rail spur bein' built. I aim to follow along with that venture."

"You mean yuh like the idea of the steel comin' in?" Longstreet looked puzzled.

"Why not? I still own the Anchor Cross. It'll mean easier shipments and a lot more law."

Breen intervened.

"Since when did you get on the law side, Kirby?"

"I've never been on any other." Kirby faced the new deputy squarely. "Only it's got to be honest law. *Sabe?*"

"Meanin'?"

"Meanin' U.S. Law, not Val Calhoun's brand," Kirby said carefully between his teeth. "Yore boss!"

Breen's eyes slitted and his hand fell to his waist but it halted there. Kirby had not moved a muscle. Neither had Longstreet. Longstreet seemed content to let things run on as they were doing. There was a tense pause before Breen turned to his drink.

"Yeah, almost forgot to tell yuh," he muttered. "Calhoun wants to see yuh, Kirby. Told me to ask yuh to drop in on him tonight."

Longstreet was rigid. Kirby sensed it.

"Where might I find Mister Calhoun right now, Breen?" he asked.

"He's at the Cascade," Breen replied. The Cascade was a hotel and bar. "Probably up in his rooms about now."

Kirby shot a look at the sheriff, pushed away his glass, and tightened his belt. "Reckon I better see him pronto, then. He might be growin' ideas."

"He's grown 'em," Breen said, and displayed a snag-toothed grin. It was in a sense a grimace of comradeship, as though Breen had recognized a man who would be on his side in the next few minutes.

Longstreet looked unhappy when Kirby went out. He kept staring at the bottom of his glass. Breen looked satisfied and smug.

"Here's to Val and Kirby gittin' along," he said. He added quickly, "That's lucky fer Kirby. On his reputation Kirby ought to be in jail."

Longstreet's expression had grown sour.

He turned away and spat.

"Mebbe yuh know somebody hereabouts big enough to take him there," he said, and stalked out into the dusty street.

CHAPTER III

Calhoun Makes an Offer

CALHOUN occupied a suite of two rooms on the second floor of the hotel. Below the rooms the barroom was in full splendor. Girls moved in and out among the customers, skirts swishing. Bearded graders were rubbing shoulders with lank prospectors, engineers and cowpunchers. Kerosene lamps hung at the end of long chains from the high ceiling shedding a garish light over all.

The whole scene had the aspect of a town on a new frontier, not in keeping with the old Resaca which until now, had been only a sleepy cattle junction.

When Kirby came in he was aware that he was being noticed. Men watched him as he turned to ascend the stairs to Calhoun's rooms. Soon he was rapping on the door to Calhoun's quarters.

He was kept waiting only for seconds. The door opened cautiously and he was facing Tip Garrity whose eyes were unfriendly and suspicious. He held on to the doorknob while one hand rested on a holstered gun.

Behind him Kirby could see Calhoun. He was sitting in a straight-backed chair before a plain board table on which stood glasses, a pitcher of water, a bottle and a deck of cards. Smoke drifted in front of his face from one of his long thin cigars. He did not move except to lift his cold eyes.

"If that's Kirby, let him come in," he said. "Want to palaver with him."

Kirby pushed on in, conscious that layered smoke moved as he moved. He felt the heat from the brassy lamp in his face.

Calhoun proved to be a slender, fastidious man attired in a long light coat despite the heat of the evening. He had on a dark shirt and a string tie and his long fingers were stroking his mustache. His eyes were jet black and they stared from under arched, stenciled eyebrows. He watched Kirby when the door closed and Kirby noticed then that there was a third man beside himself in the room. The shadows were too deep in the farther corner for him to be sure but he imagined this to be Bill Heenan, another one of Calhoun's gunmen. Then Kirby centered his attention on Calhoun.

The town boss was regarding him carefully.

"Heard yuh wanted to talk, Calhoun," Kirby said.

He moved closer to the man behind the table. He did not seem at all concerned. Calhoun put the thin cigar back between his lips held it without drawing on it.

"Yeah. You came back with a reputation, Kirby, eh?"

Kirby appeared bored. "I left with one. What of it?"

Calhoun sucked in some smoke and let it drift ceilingward. "I can find use for you." He leaned forward, one hand upraised, as Kirby made a movement. "Wait! You noticed anything strange since you got back? The way folks look at yuh?"

Kirby shook his head. His eyes narrowed. "I notice they don't ask too many questions, or *habla me malo,*"* he said. "But there may be reasons for that." His voice was grim.

Calhoun seemed appreciative. "There are," he said. "Mebbe you can thank me for it. I had word you was on yore way. And I let it leak out that you were coming back to work—for me."

Kirby's eyes were slitted. He drew a deep breath. Calhoun watched the signs and rushed on, "Better think twice before you let yoreself get too riled, Kirby! I knew what I was doin'. Folks in this town got you labeled. You're 'bad.' They all know it. The sheriff knows it. So does his deputy."

"Breen knows what you tell him to know," Kirby observed.

"Shore! And so will everybody else when I take things over hereabouts," Calhoun said complacently. "Breen'll be in. Rafe Longstreet, if something don't happen to him meantime, he'll be out. There'll be no rail spur and no line of steel through to Resaca. Cattlemen will contract with men I appoint to handle and deliver beef—deliver in safety—to the stockyards at Aja. You beginnin' to savvy?"

"I'm beginning to understand that you intend to wreck the proposed rail system and then take over entire with yore own brand of law," Kirby said. "That is,

* *Habla me malo: Mexican slang for "talking bad at me".*

that's what you intend. Did you forget I'm a cattleman? And that the spur 'll mean something to me?"

CALHOUN spoke in tones of contempt. "You're what you're branded, Kirby—*un hombre malo.* I made sure of you first. Folks here know your reputation and it's bad. They all expect you to side with me. And they know what I'm out for. I got *dinero.* Fact is, I'm usin' that money to play a deep game, a big one. The rails mean law and I don't want to be crowded with law, unless I own it, and so there 'll be no rails!"

Kirby pushed back his hat a little. "I think you're wrong, Calhoun, dead wrong," he said, his voice still mild. "Anyway, like I said, I'm still a cattleman. Would that be all you wanted to talk to me about?"

Calhoun's eyes grew murky with anger. Behind Kirby, his gunman shifted. Kirby seemed not to notice. Calhoun spoke carefully.

"I'm makin' yuh a big offer, Kirby," he said. "Mebbe it's what's holdin' us up: mebbe yuh don't understand. I'll take the Anchor Cross off yore hands tomorrow morning, complete, and you're namin' the price. I'll guarantee what men yuh have there will get jobs. You can also have the sheriff's star when we're ready for it, and I'll put you on my payroll the same way, at yore own price. Am I clear now?"

Kirby nodded. "Reckon," he said. "And if that's all, tell yore rabbit behind me at the door that I shoot when anybody gets in my way. Good night!"

Calhoun sat staring but Kirby found the door open when he got to it and he did not turn back when he went out. He could hear the door close after him.

On leaving Calhoun's rooms Kirby knew he was being dogged. It amused him faintly. He found himself in the bar once more. Oddly enough, he found himself wondering about Cynthia. She was the one woman who had ever disturbed his orderly thinking. From the very first she had possessed a real appeal for him, but since he would not acknowledge the extent of it even to himself, he persisted in trying to ignore it. Women were not in the life he had chosen, even if he had returned to Resaca in the hope of making a new life. Besides, there was Hume. Hume possessed all the qualities that he himself lacked, except perhaps, strength of purpose. Hume was in his mind when that individual stepped in front of his vision, blocking it.

He regarded the man more carefully. There was something attractive about him despite his air of Puritanism and rectitude. Something familiar too, Kirby knew of a sudden. He would have been surprised to see Hume reach for a drink and he was almost surprised when he saw a dead panatela in the engineer's hand. Hume looked pale, jerky. There was no friendliness in his face.

"I'd offer you a drink, Kirby, but I don't take any myself," he said. "Been looking for you. The chief 'd like to see you."

"Which one is chief in this town? I've just had a palaver with Calhoun. I suppose you mean Ringbold?"

"Meaning, *Mister* Ringbold," Hume said. Bright spots showed on his high cheekbones and he looked thinner than before, worried.

"Where is he?"

Hume jerked his head. "He's got a place in town, aside from his ranch. I'll take you. Coming now?"

"Why not?" Kirby stalked out of the barroom at Hume's side and when they struck the planked sidewalk he turned, his lips quirking. "You don't like me, do you, Hume?"

"I have something to thank you for," Hume replied carefully, as they struck a pace up the street. "Maybe some day I'll be able to even it up. But I still don't see why you interfered?"

"Didn't I make it plain that I'm a cattleman?"

"So are some others—on the other side."

"That so?" Kirby replied. "Well, I'm on this side. So we're going to see Ringbold!"

They had approached the end of the street. It was dark. At the end, near the edge of town, some small houses stood. One looked more pretentious than the rest, possibly because it stood in back of a clump of stunted trees and bushes that looked as if they had been cultivated. A low, white-picketed fence encircled the premises, and there was a path.

"Mr. Ringbold lives here," Hume said. "He took the place with a rental lease after the firm bought up most of the stock on the Cattlemen's Bank and Trust

in town. He's a vice-president." He spoke primly.

"It was a mortgage, no doubt," Kirby said, as he went in through the short gate. Hume was at his heels. He did not comment.

THE girl, Cynthia Varick, was in the small but well-fitted room that might have been termed a library or a den, when Hume brought Kirby in. A servant had appeared and vanished. Kirby accustomed his eyes to the low kerosene lamp light in the big ballooning globe, and saw her, first, then Ringbold, sitting in back of a huge table-desk in a big overstuffed chair.

One lock of Ringbold's thinning hair hung down over one eyebrow and his heavy shoulders above the desk dominated the room. He removed a cigar from his mouth, made as if to rise and then stopped the movement, touched his cigar end and sat back.

"Ah, good!" he said. "Glad to see you, Mr. Kirby."

Kirby had removed his hat. "We'll take all that as said," he answered. "Why did you want to see me, Ringbold?"

Ringbold eyed him. "Why did you come when I sent for you?" he countered.

Kirby smiled a little. "Just to ask that question," he said, and watched a change spread over the rail executive's face.

Plainly Ringbold was accustomed to considerably more deference than Kirby had displayed. Kirby waited. He had only glanced once at the girl but he knew that her eyes had remained fixed on him.

Ringbold jerked forward, jabbed with his cigar. "One thing, I'd like to know why you come back to this town, Kirby —particularly at this time."

Kirby considered. "I don't suppose there's any reason for not telling you," he said. "It's simple. I came back to see that my property was being taken care of."

"Yet you haven't been near it yet!"

Kirby grinned. "Do you think I've had much chance?"

The corners of Ringbold's eyes tightened. "Uh-uh. Not with all your engagements maybe. Sheriff and Val Calhoun and all his paid gun-hands."

"Not to speak of getting outside the first meal I've had since mornin', looking around on my own account, stablin' and taking care of a plumb fine cayuse—and mindin' otherwise my own business," Kirby agreed complacently.

There was a silence in the room. It reached and spread out. Ringbold took the cigar from his lips, looked at it, appeared surprised to find it unlighted. Then he scratched a match.

"You're known as a bad man with guns, Kirby," he said.

Kirby's lips twisted in what might have been a smile. "I'm glad of that," he said. "Saves havin' to prove it to folks."

"And," Ringbold continued, his cigar now alight, "they tell me that Calhoun sent for you, that he had use for those same guns."

"Is that last information," Kirby sneered. "Or is it just a fairly good guess?"

Ringbold flushed. "If it's a guess, it might be a right close one. Is it true?"

"My guns are my own," Kirby answered evenly.

"Any price on 'em. Any price at all?"

"No price on 'em. No price at all."

"We know the news has leaked out," Ringbold said carefully, choosing his words. "The shipment of rails and sleepers we been waiting for to finish up our spur into Resaca, it's on its way. Due in a day or two at most. They know it. You probably know it. Maybe I'm not tellin' you anything, maybe it's got a lot to do with your comin' back—" He broke off.

"But you are telling me somethin'," Kirby interposed.

Ringbold looked discomfited. He coughed. "Anyway, it's due right now, which is one reason why those tracks were torn up," he said. "At any cost the lawless element here is going to stop those rails comin' in to Resaca. Our option says we got to finish in a couple more days. We can, if we have the supplies here. The laborers can get here in a few hours. We also can get laborers in town, but we'll have to protect 'em. If we don't get our stuff through, the spur is doomed. Calhoun and his crowd are doing what they can to stop us. What I want to know is, can we—can I—outbid Calhoun for your services? Or do we fight?"

Kirby waited a long time. Ringbold added carefully, "I want it understood that I don't approve of bidding for hired guns. But the rails have got to go through!"

Kirby nodded, almost as if he had not

heard but had been thinking of something else. He heard Hume stir behind him and he did not look toward the girl.

"You mean you're biddin' for my guns too?" he said, at last.

"I mean what I said—the rails have got to go through at any price. Just what is your price, Kirby?" Faint contempt was in the tycoon's voice.

Kirby reached and tightened his belt. He shifted his sagging guns. He took a deep breath.

"You haven't got enough behind yuh to pay it, Ringbold," he said. "Now let me out of here." Hume was in his way but he stepped back as Kirby stalked for the door.

A smothered cry came from the girl's lips. Hand on the doorknob, Kirby turned. He saw her eyes bent pleadingly upon him. Her hand went out, and even while he watched, it faltered and fell. He smiled again, but it was not a pleasant smile.

"Some time, Miss Cynthia," he said, stressing the title, "remind me to introduce yuh to an honest man. There are some left. *Buenas noches!*" He went out and no one was in his path.

CHAPTER IV

Singing Lead

AFFAIRS at the Anchor Cross were in fair shape. It took Kirby only an hour or two to comprehend that the coming of the rail spur would mean more than he had believed, to him, even though at the start it would cut into what surplus he had. This would be due to the additional taxes which the county was planning on levying to help pay the initial costs. However, such costs would be wiped out by two good seasons, with the decrease in shipping costs.

A shipment base at Resaca would eliminate almost entirely the menace of rustling bands which had made a habit of intercepting the longer trail-drives to Aja. That these rustlers knew just when and where drives started was obvious, and that their information was derived from sources in and about Resaca, had become an accepted fact.

Kirby's foreman, McGuire, rolled a cigarette and hid his surprise when he saw his employer back at the ranchhouse.

"We're sittin' pretty, now yuh're here and clear, Cim," McGuire said. "All yuh need to do now is to free them rails and then take unto yoreself a squaw."

Kirby grinned. "Comin' from you—" he said.

"I'm too old," McGuire interrupted. "Why when things settle down here yuh stand to be one of the biggest men in the state. If yuh play it right. How about Ringbold's gal?"

"She believes I'm crooked, that I'm playin' with Calhoun's bunch."

"Shore 'nuff? And what does Calhoun believe?"

"He'd like to believe something but he doesn't know what it is. I'm in wrong at this town, I reckon. I'd be a settin' hen for hombres like Calhoun. He offers to buy up the Anchor Cross at my own price and pay me my own price for my guns."

McGuire forbore from the obvious question. He only said, "Won't be long now. Watch that gal, Cim. I heard the shipment of rails is closer than they're lettin' on, mebbe bein' afraid of interference."

"I can believe that," Kirby said. "Ringbold doesn't trust me enough to let me in on what he knows. In fact he doesn't trust me at all. Tomorrow we'll check up and figure out the best place for me to watch developments. Right now I'm right puzzled."

McGuire reached down underneath the table and brought up an earthenware jug. He twirled two tin cups from a rack behind him.

"We'll relax," he agreed. "It's goin' to be tough ahead, *amigo mio*. Yuh should have stayed in Durango."

The answer to that was plain enough without comment. They drank.

Kirby tarried at his own ranch that night, talking. He spent most of the day following in going over accounts. It was mid-evening before, a solid meal under his belt and his pony fed and groomed and rested, he rode back into Resaca and booked a room at the hotel there. Groups of men hung about indecisively in the streets and seemed to congeal in larger groups in front of the largest bar.

Ringbold's supply train had been reported. It was due at any time. That much news was simple to gather. And coincident with the knowledge a number of Calhoun's known employees had disappeared from favorite haunts of theirs in town. No one needed to ask where they had gone. Calhoun was out to halt that train and its precious cargo. He couldn't stop now, in mid-stride, with victory in sight.

Kirby walked to Ringbold's house. It was dark.

Frowning, he made his way back to the center of town. He had no way of knowing where Ringbold might be, nor of Hume's whereabouts. But he was more interested in where Cynthia Varick could be. The strange hostility that he had sensed between them only sharpened his interest.

Kirby remembered that Hume had a small place at the farther edge of town. He went to the stables, saddled, and mounted. He walked his pony down the main street, a darkened street now, and growing more turbulent every minute. Even the lights from the barrooms seemed to be flung farther across the wide open stretches between the rows of false-fronted edifices. Voices seemed to be blending in an undercurrent of excitement, carrying a suggestion of men waiting for some momentous event to occur.

Hume's shack, which served him for an office too, lay in darkness. Kirby slipped from his saddle, tugged his pony to the rear of the place, and went back to its front door. The shack was compactly built, mostly of adobe but it had an air of recent abandonment. A faded shingle told its legend. There were no window panes. The black squares, where they should have been, had been covered on the inside with a kind of burlap. The place looked dismal, like a tomb long forgotten, in the faint moonlight just beginning to glow.

KIRBY rapped once, then, not waiting for any answer, he pushed at the door, and it opened inward. Hand on his right-hand gun he stepped aside to call into darkness.

"Hume! You in there?"

There was an interval of silence. Then a voice spoke from the darkness, "I don't erase easy, Kirby." It was Hume's tense voice.

Kirby gave an exclamation of impatience. Advancing, he snarled, "If you've got a gun in the dark there, put it up! There's folks besides me need what lead it carries tonight! You fool!" He pushed inside the shack.

Hume's voice came from the shadows. "What 're you here for?" It was suspicious, warily edged.

"Mebbe to find out what makes the wheels go round inside of people like you!" Kirby snapped. "Expectin' Cynthia?"

A pause. "Why? And I asked what you're here for, Kirby. Calhoun send you?"

Kirby's eyes were slits, green in the dark. "In minutes, if we're not clear of here, they'll be after you. Don't ask me why—maybe because they figure you might be able to stop 'em, some way. Calhoun's men are raidin' the end of the spur tonight, gettin' there before yore relief train hits town. Or mebbe they plan to wreck the wagons as part of the game. If you hadn't been here holin' up like a gopher in the dark, you'd 've known about it!"

Hume's answer was still wary. "But you know it, Kirby! Why? Not because Calhoun told you, would it be?"

"Certainly because Calhoun told me," Kirby snapped. "Come on out of your rathole and get in the fight!"

Hume's tall lean figure loomed pallid in the dark. "Why are you interested?" he insisted. "You're Calhoun's man. We know it!"

"I'm my own man, but that isn't the idea," Kirby said. "Calhoun's out to crowd the spur end tonight. Do you care?"

"I care plenty but what can I do about it?" Hume demanded. "I'm alone, or at least, I was alone, till you pushed in here. What do you want me to do?"

"Where is Ned Franck?" Kirby snapped.

"Out there."

"Alone?" Kirby's scorn reeked in his voice.

"Why not? He uses the caboose to sleep in, saves roomrent. Is one watchman enough? No, but I can't have ten!"

"No, but you'd leave him there when trouble's comin'. Where's Cynthia?"

Hume hesitated. "She'll be—back," he said.

"Back here?"

"Why not? I'm going out to the spur but I wanted to see her first, if you

must know. Ringbold went to the county seat today, trying to get some U. S. Army support. He won't get it. Anyway he's away. Cynthia told me trouble was coming. Now you. And they want me first. But even without that, how are the three of us going to fight 'em off with a couple of guns?" He added bitterly, "And Cynthia's quirt!"

Kirby was breathing hard through his nose. He had, in the beginning, no doubt of the courage of this man who was facing him across the dark. Nor did he doubt his courage now. There was something else.

"It's Cynthia's on yore mind," he said softly. "Isn't it?"

"Maybe. And maybe you. But differently."

Kirby swore. Time was running out fast and this stolid man was adamant. "We knew each other once before, Hume," he said softly.

Hume said, after hesitation, "Yes. We did."

"In San Antonio," Kirby pursued. "You killed a man."

"And ran away," Hume agreed tonelessly. "You a Ranger?"

"I'm what I said I was," Kirby said in the same flat voice. "A cattleman." But he returned to the subject. "You were scheduled to stretch rope for that job in San Antonio. You escaped. More power to you. You weren't guilty and I know it was self-defense. But the law still wants you back there and that's why you mistrust everybody here."

"I don't trust much," Hume admitted.

"I'm not askin' for any trust," Kirby said. "I want to see that relief train get through safe. And I want to see Cynthia safe. I know you and I aren't friends, Hume, but there it is. Anybody we can send on an errand, around here?"

"I'm alone," Hume said. "Where's the errand? Calhoun?"

Kirby ignored that. "My outfit," he said. "We're goin' to need help. My boys 'd come."

"I'm alone," Hume repeated stubbornly. "And there's valuable documents in this place can't be left behind."

"Then we'll have to—"

POUNDING hoofbeats sounded from the open. A horse came at a gallop up the slight incline before the cabin and its rider flung herself to the ground. In the white patch of fitful moonlight, Kirby saw Cynthia running across the grass. Hume whispered an oath.

Cynthia burst into the shack, breathing hard. Hume held out both his hands but she pushed them away.

"They're coming!" she cried. "I've just left—ranch—uncle's. He's gone. Sent men to the Anchor Cross. It's tonight!" She saw Kirby then, and uttered a startled gasp.

"I've been tryin' to impress that on our friend here," Kirby said quietly. "He's too much taken up with hatin' me to worry about it, so I'd best be goin'. My advice is for you both to get out to Ringbold's.

"They'll attack where it hurts but they won't bother with that place, at least not till they've won what they set out for first. What they want is the relief train and the tracks." He went to the door and the girl's voice reached to him as he hesitated.

Further hoofbeats were pounding over the hard surface of the road from Resaca. Kirby glimpsed his tethered pony and started at a quick run toward him. A shot cut across the dark. Voices could be heard.

Kirby stopped. They all stood listening and the girl at last managed to speak. "You said—you—you're going to help us."

"With a little luck I may be able to get some help from my place. Mebbe I can pick up some of yore uncle's men. But I'm not goin' to spend the rest of the night wishin' I had done somethin'." He turned, his face strained and metal-hard in the slanting white moonlight. "I think they've possibly followed you out here. In that case, Hume, you'd better get her away. If they had her in their hands, they'd have a real hostage to use when they come to givin' Ringbold their terms!"

"Where are you going?"

But Kirby was already running across the open toward where his horse waited under a small clump of sycamores. The hoofbeats were getting closer by the second. He cast a look toward the road from town, then sprang toward his mount.

A pair of riders cut off from the horsemen moving from town and he could see them between himself and the trees. A shot lanced through the dark. He could hear lead strike.

A second later Hume was staggering

halfway across the open, crouched, firing. Kirby turned and saw him.

"Get back, yuh fool!" Kirby cried.

But Hume was cursing. Kirby turned abruptly from his first purpose. His hands dived for his guns, came up. As Hume fired again, two more shots seared from the riders across the open, and Hume swayed.

Kirby started to fire. At his second shot a horse came to a sliding halt, its rider catapulting over its head like a sack of oats. The second rider dashed on, swerving. Kirby fired again.

The second horseman zig-zagged away from the spot, his face a white blur in starlight, for he had just seen his companion fall. Kirby flung a shot in his direction but it went unanswered. The hoofbeats pebbled off and he turned back to the shack.

Hume was getting to his feet. "Hurt?" Kirby snapped.

"Nicked," Hume managed to answer, holding onto his left arm and groping for a fallen pistol with the hand from which blood was running. "Just nicked." His voice held a cold edge, strained.

Kirby's eyes met Cynthia's. She was in the shack doorway and her eyes reflected the moonlight just returning. A surge of feeling rippled through him at sight of her, recollection. Then under the whip of urgency, his anger returned.

Hume hated him and he knew why. That there was no need of it, he realized too. In another scene and another setting, Hume, the man from the East, from the background of schools and education and culture, had been far ahead. Then Kirby had returned—Kirby, with black marks against him to begin with.

Kirby whirled, amidst his own thoughts. More horsemen were coming down the winding road from town. He felt for his guns, thumbed their cylinders full again, turned back to the open.

"Take care of that so-called 'nick' of his, Cynthia," he said. "What I opine is that that pair out front were only following you, mebbe, and that we've got a real gang on our hands now, if Calhoun's guessed the truth about us."

"But we've got to get some help out to the spur!"

"Yeah," Kirby muttered. "Yeah. So we do!" And he walked outside. But he did not get far.

The echoes he had heard a moment before were louder now. He turned suddenly. Cynthia was still in the doorway. No light was behind her. In that light her eyes were luminous. Their glances locked and something wordless seemed to pass between them, all the while the hoofbeats were coming closer over the hard-packed trail from town.

"Mebbe I better stay away a few minutes more," he said softly.

He led his mount into a tall grove, hobbled him, then went quickly to the shack. By the time he had reached the doorsill the oncoming riders, four of them, by the sound, were close, just rounding the bend, he judged. He heard her say:

"It may be our—my foreman, Reece Rafferty. He knew I was coming back here. He didn't want me to come."

He nodded. "It won't be Rafferty," he said. "Too soon." Turning, "Has it ever occurred to you what a hold Calhoun would have on Ringbold if he had you in his hands to bargain with?"

She paled. "Calhoun wouldn't dare try that!"

"Calhoun's playin' for sky-high stakes before mornin'," he said. "He wouldn't dare *not* to dare!"

Her fingers played with the small gun in its holster. They came away as if instinctively recognizing its ineffectuality. It was a .32, deadly at close range, but no match for the guns the raiders would be carrying. He glanced back inside the shack. Hume was wavering there, a gray shirt ghostly against the dark.

Kirby spoke quickly:

"Are you able to handle a gun, Hume?"

"Yes. I think so."

"Good! Then the two of you—slam and bolt this door! Hold 'em off when they come. Rafferty should get here soon. Me, I've got business!"

He slid into the shadows clustering near the shack.

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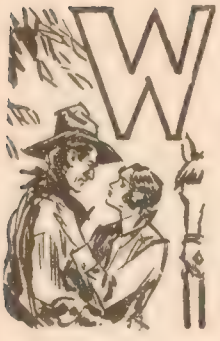
CHAPTER V

Fight for the Spur



WALKING away from where he had left his horse, Kirby let his boots discover for him the course of the trickle of stream bed that furnished water for the shack's needs. He followed it, all the while aware of the pound of approaching hoofbeats in his ears, moving with an Indian's stealth, until the trees shrouded him.

He was surprised to discover two horses, unsaddled but ground-hitched, standing there, heads above the fringe of bush down where the stream licked languidly at its bank. He felt them, discovered saddles, frowned.

Probably, he reflected, they belonged to the railroad crew, engineers and surveyors, and had been abandoned there. Maybe one could be Franck's. He turned in time to see three riders swooping down off the shouldered road, heading for the shack.

Instantly fire opened up and the riders slipped to the ground. Kirby crouched and moved forward. Two shots came from the shack.

A voice bellowed out: "We come for Miss Varick, Hume! Her uncle done sent us to bring her back. Let her out and it's all over."

Hume's reply was a lone shot crackling toward the voice.

The bunched attackers then spread out and began moving toward the shack door, flanking it on two sides. One of them crept with caution toward the front. Kirby moved too, inching forward.

He strained his eyes, accustomed now to the uncertain moonlight, to make out the position of the attackers, even though the outlaws were in constant movement. There seemed to be only three of them, and except that their faces looked vaguely familiar, he was certain he knew none of them. But they were wearing two pistols apiece and one had a shotgun while another carried a Winchester carbine.

Kirby moved toward where they had picketed their horses, loosed the beasts quietly, while more shots rattled toward the slightly higher ground on which the shack stood. Hume was evidently not wasting lead. The shooting had come from the besiegers. There had been no sound from Hume and Cynthia, and Kirby knew that must be puzzling the raiders.

At last he had two bridles in his hand and he led two docile mounts forward through the dark. He angled toward a position where he was a little higher than the others, then dropped the reins, and standing between two mounts, slapped them on the flanks.

Instantly the horses were charging in the only direction they knew, forward. As they dashed forward, Kirby began firing.

The attackers turned, at a command from one of their number. Someone had sense, Kirby reflected. Loosing their horses had not flustered the outlaws.

The outlaws came in Kirby's direction, taking what cover they could and Hume immediately opened up at their rear from inside his barricade. Kirby spotted the nearest man as he leaped for cover, and fired.

The man made a pinwheel stop, toppled over and lay on his face. A lone shot *thwacked* into his prone, quivering body. But instantly his companions were pouring a sleet of fire in through the doors and window crannies of the shack. Smoke drifted across the small clearing.

Kirby spotted one man behind a tree stump, spotted him from the flash a big Sharps made as he fired. He went walking down toward that man, gun ready.

It was not in him to shoot at a man from the rear, though he might have. Hence he was glad when the man, warned by some instinct of peril, got to one knee, swiveled, and stood half erect facing him.

The guns spoke together. Kirby found himself for a brief instant staring into a ball of crimson flame from the Sharps' mouth. Then the flame was dissipated and a man was falling earthward. It was only as the man fell that he recognized him as Pat Murphy, one of the gunmen he had seen with Garrity and Greb at the rail head.

Hoofbeats were sounding anew over the roadway behind, and Kirby swore. He ran forward. But the last attacker

was making for the spot where the horses had been tethered. Kirby watched him go, grimly, then faced about to meet whatever new menace there was. A few seconds later a voice he knew cried out:

"Cynthia! You in thar?"

The shack door came open and Cynthia was framed against the dark. Behind her the engineer was a shadow clutching a bandaged arm.

"You all right, Cynthia?" Kirby called.

"Yes!" she cried. "Oh yes! And that —that's Reece Rafferty, my foreman!"

KIRBY stood a moment. He understood. He nodded as if to himself. Hume would consider all the battle over by now, now that Cynthia was momentarily safe. But there was work to be done still, for the most desperate work lay ahead. Cynthia was, for the time being, removed from danger, but the rails still were in peril.

Kirby made his way to the thicket and loosed his pony, clambering wearily into the saddle. He knew, of a sudden, how tired he was, and he told himself that his tiredness had no connection with the girl.

He didn't look back. Out of a corner of his eye he saw Reece Rafferty ride up, three well-armed punchers trailing him, saw Cynthia running across the short strip of open. He could hear their mutual expressions of satisfaction. Then he pointed his pony's nose out toward the roadway and closed his ears to Cynthia's cry from behind him.

To the eastward an ominous red glow was rising in the sky. The town of Resaca looked deserted when Kirby hit its outskirts a little more than half an hour later. The bars and hotel stood deserted. All the places of business were closed tight. The jailhouse had a forlorn appearance and no light showed in the office of the sheriff. Kirby kept on going. He passed Ringbold's house and it too lay in darkness behind its screen of mimosa and white fence pickets.

A sort of numbness settled over him. He had been riding and fighting now for more hours than he was willing to count. Far back in his mind lay the certainty of why he was doing all this, and yet his original intent had become blurred with the rapidity of events and emotions.

Both sides were hostile to him and he had long known that he had no chance of convincing either side of his sincerity. Moreover, he knew he no longer cared especially. It was his own fight that mattered.

He bore little resentment toward Hume, even. Hume had let himself be blinded by jealousy, and perhaps fear of something in his past. But the past did not matter now. There was the future, the future of a new and vividly alive country, crying against its bonds, and somehow Kirby could feel an echo of that cry deep inside him. He was part of the plaint, part of the raw new world into which he had been born struggling, and would continue to struggle.

Fighting was in him and as much a part of him as breathing. To be sure, in some hazy and distant future, he might envision an end of conflict and a surcease of earned peace in a land he had helped to win and make clean. But it was like that bird ancients called the Phoenix. It had to be cleansed in its own fires, and purged. The forge was hot—its flame living.

He forced thoughts of Cynthia from his mind. Such thoughts made for weakness and now he was riding into flame. He would need strength.

A little later, topping a low rise, he could make out in the distance the end of the rails. He halted for seconds to survey the work caboose, the abandoned engine, the twisted steel and scattered ties. Soon the relief train might be here, and there would be ambush to meet it, if it arrived unsuspecting. If warned, there would be a furious attack, swift and sudden and treacherous. His task was to put the relief crew on guard.

He thought he had a chance of being in time and with that thought he discounted the odds against him.

Nearing the scene, riding across the uneven open, he made out a moving figure amid the strewn wreckage. It moved in a strangely eccentric course, weaving in and out. It might be mirage.

But coming closer, Kirby knew it for the battered figure of the man Franck, the leadsman-surveyor, who must be alone here. He cursed Hume who, even in his fine devoutness for his cherished project, would let another man bear his hazard unaided. Hume, who thought more of his jealousy and of a girl than he did of his vaunted ideals.

Then other shadows were moving across the purple-hued alkali waste.

They shifted and blended with the shadows formed by long dunes and ridges of blown sand. Dull moonlight twisted them.

They were men—horses!

Instinctively Kirby touched his spurs and his jaded animal picked up a pace that was clogged by the dragging sand. He crested a new rise; then he was above the scene and able to see.

Three riders were converging on the place where the rails had stopped, where the wrecked caboose lay, and the work car.

The first figure he had seen disappeared almost at once.

SUDDENLY a blast of gunfire shattered the silence of the desert and that single limping figure became obliterated. Kirby charged on down the slope.

The three riders were ringing the caboose now. Kirby angled off until his approach was hidden by the bulk of the overturned and derailed engine. He dashed for the engine and was on foot before his pony had ceased the breathless gallop, breathing hard. His guns were in his hands even as the second burst of fire came.

Heedless, Kirby started on a run for the shelter of the wrecked locomotive. He made out the riders. He fired—once. A cry answered his stab of flame. A second time he thumbed hammer, with the other gun. The riders drew off and the voice of one of them came, commanding:

"Pull out! Wait for Calhoun."

They would not need to wait long, Kirby told himself, for from his vantage he could make out another trio of horsemen just topping the slope eastward. The new riders were as yet unobserved by the men in front. They had evidently been scouting in the direction from which the relief party could be expected and something that they had seen had either given them confidence or else had served to induce them to seek for a speedy end to their activities.

Kirby saw twin shots jet out—rifle shots, he was sure—from the work car, and so he knew Franck was alive. He lifted his voice in a hail.

"Pick 'em off, Franck," Kirby yelled. "And be sure you don't pot-shot at me when I come headin' in there!"

A pause followed. "*Bueno*, Kirby! Savvy!" came Franck's feeble rejoinder.

Kirby crept closer, his guns cold now in his palms. He stopped, made certain that the coming horsemen were enemies, not friends. Moonlight, showering over the scene like a bath of blue light, showed him Val Calhoun, riding well in the forefront of the arrivals. They bristled with arms.

The attack drew off, all but two men who had come up close to the caboose. They were out of sight of the man inside.

Kirby crouched, sped across ten feet of open space, brought up under the wheels of the work car. He commenced firing again.

Instantly he was discovered, but not before one of the attackers had gone down, crawling off painfully and dragging a shattered leg and hip.

Lead spattered about Kirby then, but they could not see well enough to be certain just where he was. The attackers, even with reinforcements, spread for what cover offered and a full fifty seconds of silence ensued, while the echoes of the gun blasts died away solemnly across the open.

The moon entered the shelter of a cloud and further complicated matters. Meantime the newcomers were coming up hard and fast. They arrived, threw themselves from their saddles, and one of them made a dive that took him behind a ridge of dune some thirty yards off.

Kirby raised up a little to call: "You hurt bad, Franck?"

"Some," came the restrained answer. "But I can manage a gun. It's the blood that bothers me. I'd be all right if I had a chance to bandage these two danged wounds."

"*Two* wounds, yuh say?"

"Yep. Twice. The one under my ribs handicaps me most, though. Hurts to move. Rib cracked, I reckon. The other's in the laig. 'Fraid I ain't much good for movin', Kirby, but I can still shoot. Whar's Hume?"

"He'll be along," Kirby answered after a pause. Hume and Cynthia, Ringbold and the rest of them—they might be along, but Kirby had given up counting on anyone beside himself. It had been his own idea to make sure Cynthia was safe.

She could be out of danger by now if she wanted it that way.

CHAPTER VI

Grim Defense

KIRBY'S eyes slitted. He lay flat with chin on his leathered wrist, guns free beside him, watching. Across the sky there suddenly appeared a long streak of light that was like a lowered Milky Way.

That streak was coming from the eastward — and no one needed to tell him what that meant. It was the relief train. But it still was far off and it would approach with cautious slowness and between him and Ned Franck and it lay the enemy. The flashing thought hit his brain even before he heard the echo of the hail across the open, from behind the dunes:

"Is the dynamite set?"

Between here and the train they were going to plant a mine. Kirby sensed it, the new menace, even as Franck spoke through set teeth clenched against rampaging pain.

"It's dynamite!" Franck said. "They'll plant the charge past the gully! Wreck —train—then for you and me it will be duck-meat. There's only two of us. There should be more." He rambled like a man delirious with fever.

Kirby surveyed the front. He and Franck had now fairly good shelter. That meant that, as long as they stayed where they were, or until the raiders saw fit to converge on them and wipe them out, they were safe. Or they could wait until all the rest was finished and then get wiped out. It was easy, either way. Kirby knew the answers and mocked at himself for his cynicism.

The bar of light streaked across the sky as the relief train moved ponderously across the open.

The light lowered to twist demoniacally across the empurpled dunes and tint the drab contours of the first wreckage.

Kirby's eyes followed three men carrying boxes and trailing paraphernalia between them. They were afoot. "Franck?" he said softly. "Can you hold on a while?"

"Yeah. Cain't move though. Can shoot, is all."

"As long as you can shoot! Hold 'em here. I'm goin' out."

"Where?" His voice was startled. "Yuh'll never make it!"

"Dynamite." Kirby's answer was eloquent.

Franck said no more. He unlimbered a Buffalo gun and commenced firing. Behind him lay a bandoleer of heavy cartridges. Each recoil of the gun sent him reeling back, cursing and grunting, but he recovered. By his third shot, when the clouds of powdersmoke were drifting off, Kirby was gone.

Kirby slid under the car unnoticed. He skirted the edge of the track shoulder, got to the shadow of the caboose, crouching, went on. Once a heavy rattle of fire halted him but he saw that it was Franck, still pulling triggers, causing a flurry from the encircling raiders in front. He took that moment for himself and thumbed new cartridges into his half-emptied chambers.

Then he went on again. The light had been dimmed now, and he could just barely make out the raiders against a spray of gray dune. The track lay not ten yards from them. One of the outlaws was just returning from the main cache, after having deposited his burden. Two large boxes lay near the tracks and near them wires lay loose and curling.

Kirby crept across the intervening space. He could see where the end of the detonator wires lay, and the box that would set off the charge of heavy explosive. The idea, he understood suddenly, was to wait until the train got to within a few rods and then push the plunger. Enough explosive would be involved to not only destroy the remains of the track but to blow the relief train and all it contained into Kingdom Come.

Kirby waited until the burden-bearers had gone, then made a streak across the open. He could hear Calhoun's voice, somewhere, like a crackling whip. Lips flattened against his teeth, he darted across the open. They recognized him almost at once, and suddenly Calhoun must have understood him and interpreted his intent. Calhoun raved out a command.

Lead began whipping about him just as Kirby hit the sand and strewn shale behind a barrier of rocks where the end

of the wire lay. Already behind him lay the tracks and the dynamite charge.

He loosed his guns and opened fire, knowing that this was the most desperate battle of his life. Those others, they had to drive him out of where he was. Otherwise their precious dynamite was valueless, for they could not detonate the charge.

Kirby knew. He knew too that it was probably a losing fight. Calhoun had sent for him, because Calhoun needed somebody tough, someone not afraid of hot lead and fury. Well, he was here.

It would be more than lead, that charge, if it ever went off. It would wreck the beginnings of a new and more decent empire in the Southwest. It would destroy the dreams and plans of men who had envisioned a nobler way of living. Well, it was one way to die. In a gun-forge. A gun-forge for rails.

HE MIGHT hold them until the men with the train understood. Maybe by the shooting ahead of them, being forearmed in knowledge of danger, they would have begun to get suspicious already.

The rush came on. Smoke was blinding Kirby. It was an acid taint on his tongue and it scorched his nostrils. He could make out figures in front of him, could hear Calhoun's voice, see Garrity, and miss him with the first shot.

Then a voice sounded at his elbow. "Made it!" and Franck lay there, panting heavily. Nevertheless he had unlimbered a gun and he was firing through the haze in front of them.

"The idea is to keep 'em away from that detonator box!" Kirby gritted.

"Savvy," Franck muttered through blistered lips. He was firing.

Calhoun's voice came again.

Kirby was busy refilling his chambers. The gunfire subsided and the lights came wavering across the sky like a northern aurora.

"Stay with it, *amigo*," he said. "One thing might make them take their minds off that box, and that's Calhoun himself!"

Calhoun was crouched on one knee, Tip Garrity alongside him. A third man knelt a little behind them. He was bent over the oblong box with the strange handle. None of the three were talking. Once Calhoun rasped out an oath, and Garrity squirmed over and did something with the curling wires.

A second later they all stared up as the searchlight from the head of the relief train lanced a dagger of blue-white light across the undulating strata of sand to paint the walls of the dunes a ghastly nightmarish wash.

Kirby considered. There were seconds left now. He calculated the chances, the terrain, hefted his guns. Then abruptly he was on his feet. One .44 came just above his shoulder as he charged, bringing it to bear.

"Come on!" he cried—to nobody at all.

Calhoun doubled over. The third man—it was Heenan—started running toward a crease in the dunes to the rear of him. Garrity cursed thickly, clawed for his gun.

"Get back and see how many there are," Calhoun yelled.

He started the run himself. He and his companions had gone no more than ten paces, however, b e f o r e Calhoun h a l t e d. By this time Kirby had dropped down beside the box with its murderous plunger. Behind him the wires strung out in the direction of the rails.

Bullets began to whine over his head as he flattened. He gave a dry chuckle. Something in the enemy made him sheer off, aiming too close to the contraption. Perhaps they knew that the explosion at this time would spell destruction to themselves as well as all else. Kirby dug in as best he could and found slight cover. Calhoun was recovering from his first panicked surprise. Garrity was still cursing. The lights from the train came closer and closer, wary now.

Kirby stayed close to the ground. Seconds counted. If he could hold Calhoun and his gunnies off for a minute or so longer the train might get through in safety. But Calhoun was as well aware of that as he was, and now Calhoun must realize that he was alone.

Calhoun's voice verified this. It came in a snarl. But it was based on a miscalculation. Even as Calhoun's rush, with his two companions at his side, began, a heavy form flopped at Kirby's side and Franck's panting, labored gasp came again:

"Made it!"

Calhoun's voice raised and two more of his men could be seen skittering across the open. Kirby snapped a shot at Heenan, saw him dive for cover a good distance from his boss. The light from the

approaching train was noticeably closer now but it still crawled. The danger had been recognized and no chances were being taken.

Suddenly a hail of shots broke from the attackers and dust was spewing in Kirby's eyes. He heard a curse from behind him, a taut and strained voice that he knew but had not expected:

"Cut me in on this!"

Hume came flopping down beside him.

Hume's face was whiter than the moonglow justified; his mouth was a slash across his pale skin. He had no hat and his eyes were wild. Kirby said nothing. Franck only muttered laconically:

"Guess nobody has to tell you which direction to point at!"

He fired.

Kirby spotted Calhoun then. His face tightened. He shot a glance at his two companions, snaked back, reloading carefully. Then he wriggled back out of the dune's shadow, discovering a shallow arroyo which angled off the spot to disappear into darker shale formation.

A WILD cry came and all eyes were turned eastward as the screech of the train whistle pierced the wasteland night. The diversion gave Kirby the chance to throw himself into a scalloped-out place and get to his knees.

The firing recommenced.

"Now!" Calhoun's voice snarled. "We got to finish. It's seconds! Git to that box and let it go!"

Kirby uprose then, guns in hand. "Why don't you try it, Calhoun?" he said.

A shot whipped past his cheek. He slipped to one knee again, aware of a sting like a scorpion's lash in his thigh. But his revolvers were s p e a k i n g. Through blinding haze he made out two men converging on him but his eyes were for Calhoun. He was firing, carefully, he knew, but desperately.

Garrity loomed in front of him. He heard the labored breathing and the rasp of Franck's voice at his elbow, saw Garrity rise up, fire, and then fall forward on his face. Hume was crying out something in a mad voice. It was Hume who went staggering across the open, a smoking gun waving in his hand, and it was Hume from whom Calhoun staggered back, desperately reloading.

Thus it was Calhoun at last facing Kirby alone when two shots sounded off to the left and Hume went down on top of the third man, Breen. For perhaps two and a half seconds the men faced each other. Then Kirby's twin guns spoke at the same time as Calhoun's and the echoes rolled away and the white light came flooding full across the open.

Kirby gained his feet tiredly, hat on the desert sand. But Calhoun did not come to his feet at all, and his heavy body covered his fallen six-gun.

Through a mist Kirby could see other riders moving across the sand. Desperately he tried to thrust new cartridges into his guns but he knew he had reached the end of his strength. Blood was seeping from him, he didn't know from what part of him. He only knew his growing and unmanning weakness. He could see Hume a few yards away but somehow he knew that Hume would never move again.

Then the blinding torch of the relief train's light wiped away all darkness and he heard Cynthia's voice and knew that, for good or ill, the battle was over. The dynamite had not been loosed. The line of steel would go on!

He understood afterward. Hume had squared up at the end. Cynthia had gathered up her father's men and left Hume behind. But Hume had chosen to come on alone, anyway. From the relief train poured a squad of blue-uniformed soldiers from the fort.

The clumsy train rumbled and puffed to a standstill and the rails were through! Cynthia's cool hands were on Cimarron Kirby's forehead and her cool voice, with a little tremor in it, penetrated the fog surrounding his brain.

"It's our country, Cimarron Kirby," her soft voice was telling him, and her mouth was even softer against his heated temples. "You'll stay on. We'll stay, and we'll make it ours!"

"Reckon." Kirby swallowed hard, then drank deeply from the canteen at his lips. "Reckon it was meant that way. I didn't plan it—but a man doesn't have to plan things. Things like that. They're part of what he was born for."

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Next Issue: MAN-BAIT FOR A GUN TRAP, by T. W. FORD

SQUARE M TROUBLE

By TOM CURRY

Easy-going Van Ross suddenly has the responsibility of managing a ranch thrust upon him – plus the job of battling the dangerous and crafty killer who maps out an evil campaign of gun treachery!

CHAPTER I

Stolen Cattle

VAN ROSS smelled trouble when he recognized Sheriff Ben Myles riding beside George Dorset as the approaching party splashed across the Perch River ford and came toward the Square M. Dorset was owner of the Butternut, a large ranch east of old Matt Mathews' place.

Ross had no idea what the trouble might be but ever since Old Matt had left for Chicago the responsibility of being in charge at the Square M had rested heavier and heavier on Ross' broad young shoulders.

He rolled a quirly and took his time finding a match to light up as he rapidly tried to figure some valid reason for the coming visitation. He wanted to be prepared but he could not conjure up any cause of complaint that Dorset might hold against him. The sheriff and Dorset rode with a slow determination and there were half a dozen Butternut punchers behind them.

Van Ross leaned against the whitewashed adobe wall of the ranchhouse. He had chosen a shady patch because the southwest Texas sun was still hot, although the noon peak had passed. He was tall and lean in his spurred boots and the gray Stetson cocked at a jaunty angle. His brown hair was clipped short

A COMPLETE QUICK-TRIGGER NOVELET

With a screech of hate
Dorset whirled to shoot

and when he had time for it he liked a smooth shave. His nose was a bit long and accentuated the sharp, inquisitive look of his face. His blue eyes were set deep and were solemn, for he was feeling the responsibility of his position. He had a wide mouth and a fighting jaw.

Ross had just come in off the range and wore scratched brown chaps over blue whipcord breeches. Sweat stained his brown shirt and there was a damp band where the wide gunbelt had overheated his flesh.

There was nobody around the Square M except Chang, the Chinese, who did the cooking, and Banny Rourke, who was lying up in the bunkhouse till his broken leg mended. The ranch had been shorthanded anyway and Old Matt had hardly ridden out of sight before Rourke had managed to get pinned under a mustang and cracked his leg.

THE Square M boys were working the range west of the ranchhouse, but Ross had come in ahead of time to see to something. Try as he would Ross could not guess why Dorset was coming. He knew Dorset for he had worked at the Butternut one season before joining Old Matt. Ross did not like Dorset but few men did. Dorset had a cold personality and a suspicious one. He checked on every little thing his riders did and he had a stingy streak which did not endear him to open-handed young fellows. It took a certain breed to stick long with the Butternut. There was no hostility between Mathews and Dorset but neither would go out of his way to see the other. The ranches were far enough away so there had been no conflict.

"Howdy, Ross," sang out Sheriff Myles.

Ross waved a bronzed hand. "Light and set," he invited.

The sheriff shook his head. "Not this time. We're here on ticklish business, Ross."

Myles cleared his throat. He was a large man and in his fifties, rather ponderous in style. While he was not brilliant he was known as honest and courageous.

That feeling Ross had was increasing. Dorset's heavy black brows were meshed over his hot dark eyes and that meant a fuss. The Butternut chief was around forty. His body was big all the way through and he would tip the scales at over two hundred pounds, although he was not fat despite the paunch he sported. He wore a blue shirt, leather pants and a flat-crowned Nebraska hat. Dorset carried two six-shooters and a carbine. His men were armed and for the most part Ross was acquainted with them. He had no friends among them but none were enemies, either.

The sheriff's voice was grave as he opened fire. "I got a serious complaint, Ross. Dorset has been missin' calves and cows along with them."

A cold streak shot along Ross' straight spine. He was being accused of rustling and he knew that it was George Dorset speaking through the sheriff's medium.

"Yeah? What's that got to do with the Square M?" he drawled. He wanted to make Dorset say it out and out and face to face.

His eyes never flickered and he was watching Dorset rather than Myles. Dorset's black orbs slid off. The Butternut owner was the possessor of a devious mind. There was just a trace of fear in Dorset and Ross thought he knew why. Van Ross was known as a tough customer, not outlaw by any means, but wild and rough.

On a spree in Whistleville, the cowtown serving the local range, there had never been any puncher as full of mischief and as ready to pick a fight. Unlike many cowmen Van Ross was expert with his hands and at close range he could sweep aside a Colt with one hand and drive in a lightning knockout punch with the other. He enjoyed taking the risks. He was not a killer, yet could defend himself with a pistol as well.

One night in town he had shot and wounded a drunken bandit who had held up the saloon. Later Ross had been attacked by and had conquered three of the outlaws in a running dodge-and-fire battle through the streets. Practical jokes and pranks had tirelessly originated in Van Ross and when things grew deadly he was always up front. His fighting blood was quick to heat.

It had surprised everybody, including Ross, when Mathews had called the Square M together and had designated Ross to head the ranch during Old Matt's absence. There were older and steadier fellows available but Matt had picked a young hellion. Matt had asked Ross to ride a little way with him so they

could talk together.

"If yuh do a good job while I'm gone," Matt had said with his slow smile, "I aim to make yuh my junior pardner when I come back, Ross. I got no family and no relatives nearer than the Zoo and even if I live to be a hundred it won't be too long."

The real surprise had been that the great responsibility had steadied Van Ross. He had changed overnight from a rollicking, thoughtless fun-seeker to a worried executive. Every small matter bothering the Square M was his headache. If the Chinese cook burned the steak he heard the complaint and had to settle it. He made all decisions and worked overtime keeping the place in good shape or trying to. Figures came hard to him and he burnt the midnight oil going over and over accounts. And it seemed to Ross that everything that could go wrong did so in Mathews' absence.

MYLES answered gravely the query concerning what the loss of Butternut cattle had to do with the Square M.

"A watch has been kept," said the sheriff coolly. "The Square M has branded at least thirty Butternut calves. They were runnin' with their mothers on the range between ranches."

The sheriff waved a gnarled hand to include the rising, broken country southeast of the Square M buildings. There were no fences that way and the Butternut and Square M cattle had been mixing, the brands marking which was which.

Ross thought fast. "In that case we're fools," he drawled. "The calf branded Square M would be runnin' with a Butternut cow."

"Not at all." Myles shook his head. "The mothers were disposed of one way or another, either shot and dragged in for meat or left in the woods. The buzzards been busy lately and I seen at least ten picked carcasses. The hides were buried somewhere."

"There's a mistake here some place," said Ross. He was watching Dorset's dark face, the bristling mustache on Dorset's curled lip. "The Square M don't go in for rustlin'."

A dull flush came up under the sheriff's burned cheeks. "So yuh deny it. I wouldn't have come here unless I was shore." Myles' voice grew harsh. "I'm givin' yuh warnin'. Dorset is willin' to let it go this time but yuh'll answer for it if yuh don't quit, savvy? I'll see to yuh myself. Old Matt left yuh in charge and I reckon yuh aim to make things look good for him when he gets home. Well, yuh're young and full of beans but yuh must not touch other men's cattle. That's all. Yuh've had yore warnin'."

"Wait a minute." Ross was angry, too. He took a step toward the sheriff and George Dorset. "Dorset put yuh up to this, Myles. I got nothin' against yuh. But why didn't yuh come here and talk for yoreself, Dorset? What's the matter, are yuh afraid?"

"I'll show yuh if I'm afeared," burst out Dorset. "I'll come over here and take care of yuh myself if yuh don't cut it out, Ross."

"Yeah? Get off yore horse and we'll have it out here and now, Dorset."

The fighting spirit so quick to rise to a challenge flared high in Ross.

For an instant he thought that George Dorset would jump down and start shooting but Sheriff Myles pushed his horse between them.

"Cool off, both of yuh," snapped the sheriff. "Stand back, Ross. Dorset, yuh done right to come for me to settle this. I'll take care of disputes and there won't be any plain and fancy shootin', savvy? I intend to see the law control this country. Yuh've had yore warnin', Ross. See yuh heed it. Come on, Dorset."

Ross held himself in. He was still mad all the way through but his dignity as boss of the Square M kept him from pulling Dorset off his black gelding and showing him what it meant to accuse a decent man of thievery.

"I tell yuh yuh're wrong, Myles," he declared. "There's been no rustlin' on our part."

"Oh no?" yelled Dorset. "Ask that Tilly cuss. I fired him and yuh hired him."

"What do yuh mean?" demanded Ross.

But George Dorset pulled his reins and turned away. "Come on, Sheriff. If they pull any more of it we'll settle their hash."

Mystified, yet righteously indignant, Van Ross squatted down to finish his smoke as he watched the riders leave the ranch. He had been astounded at the

accusation, and particularly wounded because not only Dorset but the sheriff seemed to think he had resorted to rustling to swell the Square M herds simply because he wanted to show off and prove to Matt Mathews what a smart foreman he was. It made him simmer. Such a trick would be silly and immature.

Not until three hours later when Dave Tilly came in with some other Square M punchers did the light dawn for Ross. Ross immediately called Tilly to the front porch where they could talk without the rest overhearing.

Tilly was a blunt man of thirty. He had blackish hair and a coarse complexion. He wore stained clothing and his pale eyes were not steady as he faced Ross. Ross would not as a rule have hired Tilly but the Square M had been short of help and after Rourke broke his leg it had been worse. Tilly had eased along a couple of days after Mathews had left and told Ross that he had had a quarrel with Dorset over wages.

ROSS had known Tilly at the Butternut and done some drinking and cutting up in town with Tilly and several others. The easy comradeship of the range made it impossible to judge men too strictly and Tilly had passed with Ross as far as that went. Tilly had asked for a job and Ross had taken him on. Riders are scarce, and hard to keep in this out-of-the-way spot.

Ross went straight to the point. "Tilly, the sheriff and Dorset were here this afternoon. They say we been rustlin', brandin' the calves of Butternut cows and disposin' of the mothers. When I called Dorset a liar they mentioned you. What yuh savvy about it?"

Tilly grinned and shrugged. Ross thought he seemed on guard. He was shorter than Ross and had to look up at the young boss.

"Well, boss, s'pose I did brand a few of the Butternut calves? It swells yore spring total."

"Yuh fool!" Ross said angrily. He was furious as well as appalled to find he had been in the wrong and George Dorset had been right. He wanted to seize Tilly by the throat and slap his stupid face, but his sense of fairmindedness prevented him from giving vent to his feelings against one of his own men.

"Yuh're lucky Dorset's boys didn't put a rifle slug through yuh while yuh were at it," he said finally. "Yuh've put me in a nasty position, Tilly."

Tilly shrank from his anger. "Shucks. I was only tryin' to help the ranch out. It would swell yore total. Yuh took me on after Dorset fired me and I wanted to do somethin' for yuh."

"Yuh have, but not the way yuh seem to think," said Ross grimly. "How many calves did yuh brand?"

"Forty-three runnin' with Butternut cows. When the mother wouldn't leave I would shoot her in the woods and either fetch in some meat or let her lie for the buzzards."

Ross made his decision. "Come inside, Tilly, and I'll give yuh yore time."

Tilly did not argue. He seemed relieved to escape with a vocal reprimand and after Ross had paid him what was due, Tilly saddled his own gray gelding and rode away to the west.

Van Ross could hardly swallow supper. He was worried because the story would spread. As Square M boss he was accountable for what his men did. Old Matt would be upset because Mathews was as honest as the day was long. Would Matt and the rest of the world believe that Ross had known nothing of Tilly's thievery?

CHAPTER II

Threats

THAT night Van Ross sat alone in the darkness on the front veranda. He could hear the young voices of his men in the bunkhouse. Since he had recently been one of them he could picture just what they would be doing at this time between the evening meal and bed. There would be a poker game on the center table by the lamplight and a couple would be mending leather that had broken.

Cigaret smoke would be curling slowly around the heated glass lamp chimney and a jest would bring a laugh once in a while. Girls would be paramount in the small talk, how Genevieve looked and what she said and the way Susie could dance.

Ross was trying to decide what he ought to do about the rustling. He wondered what Old Matt would do in such a case.

He had not heard from Mathews since the owner of the Square M had left to catch a train east and thence north to Chicago where he would undergo the serious operation. Old Matt had suffered a lot from his trouble but hoped to be cured under the knife. Ross was very fond of Matt. He was worried lest the shock of the operation kill Mathews.

Against the silver moon sky he could see the rise of jutting hills marking the source of Ruby River. He had a mind picture of the section for he had ridden through it hunting for strayed animals. Narrow trails wound in and out of gloomy pine woods and other dense growth screening the land save where gray rock upthrusts broke the forests.

The Ruby was born in the heart of the dense wilderness and so was the Perch. For a time the Ruby ran in an easterly direction through Butternut range, but Dorset's chief water was a large stream called the Kennet which was fifteen miles east of the Butternut buildings.

When Ross had been working for Dorset the Butternut cattle had been held chiefly on the Kennet. George Dorset had often cursed the rough hills to the west and had threatened to run miles of barbed wire to keep his cows from getting lost there.

Dorset could use the Ruby after it emerged from the hills if he wished. The river water was cold and clear, good for stock and for men. Matt Mathews held a clear title to most of that rugged section but the Square M lay north and west and the Perch served the Square M.

Only a few Square M cows drank on the upper Ruby where it roiled down the mountain before growing more sedate in the long valley eastward. The Perch was the western drainage of the heights and flowing as it did was easily accessible to the Square M. Mathews owned enough land to control what water he must have and this was a matter of life and death to a rancher.

It was near midnight and the bunkhouse was dark and silent when Van Ross reached his decision. He had a stiff-necked pride and it burned him to realize that Sheriff Myles, and that meant others, considered him so immature that he would order his riders to steal cattle in order to enhance his personal reputation.

"I'll pay that cuss Dorset for the cattle out of my own pocket," he muttered.

It would take all his savings and he would have to use some of the ranch money which Mathews had placed at his disposal in Whistleville First National. This sum was to pay the men, to buy necessary supplies and equipment and for other business items. Ross would work off the balance for he intended to account for every penny which Matt had put up.

In the morning he left Fred Young in charge. Young was an older man and had been at the Square M for eight years. He was segundo and while he had been superseded by Ross he held no grudge. Young and stocky, he had a seamed, immobile face. He listened and nodded as Ross gave orders and then went to the corral to saddle up and lead the cowboys forth.

VAN ROSS saddled Chesty. Chesty was his horse, a long-legged runner and better than the average mustang. Chesty was brown with darker mane and long tail and he knew Ross and would come to his owner when he was whistled up.

Ross crossed the Perch and rode east for Whistleville. The sun was coming up, bathing the range in its golden glow. It touched the granite peaks to the south and gleamed on the little river winding from the heights. The woods looked softer in the bright light and not so menacing. A spur thrust north and made a semi-circular pasture which gave good shelter for Square M beefs.

Riding on as Chesty warmed to the pace, Van Ross traveled the beaten track which had the Square M at one end and the town at the other. His quick eyes noted the aspect of the range. There were Square M cows about, grazing on the coarse, curling clumps of dew-damp grasses.

Two hours later he had ridden past the diminishing hills of the rough district. The Ruby River was on his right south of the trail. It had been a dry spring but there was plenty of flow in the stream and Van Ross considered how fortunate were the ranchers in this area for in many parts of the Southwest water was scarce and at a high premium. Land was utterly worthless without a good

supply. The number of cattle a man could run and hence the amount of money he could make was strictly determined by the water he could command. Wars had been fought and men had died with guns in hand over the precious fluid.

He kept glancing south at the valley of the Ruby. He grew more and more interested in the herds he saw grazing in the distance on both sides of the river. At last he left the road and turned south for a time until he was close enough to read the brands on some of the animals. It was the Butternut symbol, Dorset's sign of ownership.

"Dorset's pushin' his herds west," he thought and was mildly surprised, because the Kennet had always served its purpose well and Dorset had counted on that river rather than on the Ruby.

He gave an instinctive jump and so did Chesty. Something that gave the impression of a giant hornet had buzzed close to Ross' right ear and he heard a thud behind him as lead plowed into the ground. When he looked back a tiny spurt of dust showed in the air and he knew it had been a heavy bullet.

Chesty was glad to move for it was no place to linger. Ross had his pistols and a light carbine in his saddle holster but the slug which had threatened him had been sent from a powerful rifle from long range. He looked back over his hunched shoulder.

Across the river the land rolled up with few breaks of any consequence. But about half a mile southwest were some boulders screened by dark brush. As Ross watched this point the sunlight scintillated on something bright and a breath later he heard another bullet's deep-throated drone. But this time it was several feet wide as he was picking up speed on his way back to the road. He knew too much about fighting to head at the grove and try to flush out a hidden killer, armed with a superior weapon.

But the drygulcher's attempt puzzled him because the country was usually safe enough except for fools and he had no deadly enemies unless George Dorset had become one.

It was broiling hot and close to noon when he rode into Whistleville, which was on the lower Kennet. The town consisted of sun-burnt frame structures set around the central plaza. There was Brown's General Emporium, a large store. Ed's Place, a saloon and hotel, the Steer's Head, another oasis, a livery stable and corral, other service spots, offered to satisfy the needs of the surrounding range. At one corner of the plaza stood the jail and the office of Sheriff Myles, while the First National Bank was diagonally opposite the jail.

His first act was to see to Chesty who was feeling the heat and the run. The livery stable had shade and Chesty was taken care of and turned out into the back corral to rest under a big live oak.

ROSS went to the wooden sidewalk of Main Street. Wood awnings extended over the track so there was protection from the sun. But the air was still and very hot. There was a bridge across the Kennet and a small Mexican quarter on the east side. The railroad was forty miles farther south, at Valeville, where Old Matt had gone weeks ago to catch the train to his fate.

He wished to see about mail for the ranch. Whistleville was far removed from the world but Henny Brown, owner of the store, had gone to the trouble of being sworn in so he could run some sort of third-class post office. It was purely an accommodation to his customers and once a week a carrier drove to the railroad at Valeville for the bags.

It was the first time that Ross had been away from the Square M since Old Matt had left. He had his nose to the grindstone and as he surveyed the settlement he felt more relaxed. A change of scenery was good for a man, he thought. The number of wagons in front of Brown's store surprised him. They were large affairs and the horses hitched to them were heavy creatures who nodded in the warmth, thoroughly tamed, not the type used by ranches. In a couple of carts he noted plowshares. A man in blue overalls and a straw hat emerged from the store. He looked like a farmer.

Ross moved on, stopping at Ed's for a quick drink for he was very dry.

"Howdy, Ross," someone down the bar said.

Ross blinked as his eyes accustomed themselves to the dimmer light inside. It was Sheriff Ben Myles who had hailed him and the officer picked up his glass and came to join Ross.

"Mighty dry, ain't it?" said the sheriff.

Myles was not the sort to nurse a grudge if a man played a decent game.

Now he was testing out Van Ross to see how the young fellow would react after the visit the sheriff had made to the Square M.

Some men might have sulked or coldly shrugged away the sheriff, since Myles had backed up George Dorset. But that was not Ross' style. In his direct way of striking to the heart of any matter involving him the young boss spoke:

"Sheriff, I come in to draw enough cash from the bank to pay Dorset for forty-three cows and forty-three calves," Ross said. "After yuh left I found that one of my boys had been takin' Butternut cattle. It seems he wanted to help me out while Matt's away and make things look good for me."

Myles stared at him for a moment before replying in his deliberate way. "Well, that's mighty fine of yuh, Ross. I told Dorset yuh'd show sense and there was no need to blow his top."

"I'll pay Dorset at the market."

"Yuh'll save somethin'. The market dropped two dollars a head the other day."

A pang went through Ross' soul but he was not surprised, for everything had gone sour since Matt Mathews had left the range. The comparatively small amount for the Butternut cattle was nothing when stacked against the paper loss to the ranch, with thousands of head on the hoof.

"I'll pay Dorset whatever it amounts to, Sheriff."

"Bueno. Yuh're a good hombre, Ross." Myles was pleased and slapped Ross on the back. "Drink's on me."

They drank together and after a time Ross glanced at the lawman, "A drygulcher took a long shot at me on the way in. I didn't see him."

"Yeah? No idea who it could have been?"

"None at all."

"Just where was it?"

Ross described the spot, and the sheriff nodded. "Now and then some cuss on the dodge hides in that stretch of hills and woods. Yuh might have come too close to one. Mebbe he was workin' on the range cattle or he might have been a lookout for a bigger gang rustlin' in the monte. I'd ride out there but by this time they'll be a long ways off."

WHEN he left the sheriff, Van Ross went to Brown's to pick up the mail. The doors were wide open and there were many customers inside so that he had to wait, standing behind the men and women inside.

He was very tall and could look over their heads. Brown and his wife and son were busy waiting on the people. They had the aspect of farmers, tillers of the soil who were never welcome in cow country for they fenced in grass and water and objected when cattle trampled and ate the crops.

The quick-tempered, armed ranchers would fight them, but although the farmers were meek they were also stubborn and had the advantage of numbers. Once they began taking over an open range the cattlemen were licked. The only defense against them was outright ownership of great stretches of land and Ross realized how shrewd Old Matt Mathews was, for Mathews had proved title on all his range many years ago when land was very cheap.

Ross was in no hurry. It was pleasant to be away from the Square M, although in the back of his mind was the worry about all its problems and the load on his young shoulders. He had a valuable property to protect while Mathews was away.

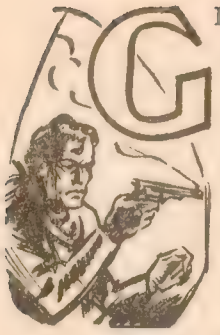
He could see over the crowd and near the counter awaiting her turn was a young woman in a blue dress. She had pushed back her sunbonnet and goldspun hair was heaped high on her trim head. The nape of her neck was soft and as she turned to speak to an older woman Ross saw she was very pretty. She had rounded features and the dark lashes of her violet eyes were long. She was small but exquisitely made.

He had something to look at and he was interested. Ross had the cowboy's normal contempt for the hoemen but he was not a bully.

If You Like This Story, You Will Also Be Interested in the Same Author's Complete Novel, GUN BOSS OF SAN ANTONE, Coming in the December issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN—*Out Soon, Only 15c at all Newsstands!*

CHAPTER III

Fight



GRADUALLY the customers went out as they finished marketing and after twenty minutes they had thinned enough so that Van Ross was close to the counter. The young woman was still there and Mrs. Brown, the storekeeper's wife, had brought forth at least a dozen bolts.

The girl had a piece of pink calico and held it to each bolt to appraise the result with an expert and critical eye. Ross thought she was trying to match it but he was no dressmaker and such matters were a mystery to him. She did not seem able to come to any decision, but one bolt held her.

"Do you mind if I take my sample and this bolt to the light, Mrs. Brown?" she asked. Ross liked her voice.

"No, go ahead, Miss Smothers."

Miss Smothers picked up the bolt and sample and turned quickly toward the door. She bumped against Ross and stepped on his toe before he could draw back out of the way. It was her fault but Ross touched his Stetson brim.

"Sorry, ma'am. I wasn't quick enough for yuh."

"Oh no, it was my fault. I'm sorry." She noticed him for the first time, and looked up into his bronzed face.

Ross looked back. Her eyes had depth and intelligence and a stray curl of the golden hair out of place on her cheek was fascinating. Perhaps she could read in the man's blue eyes what he felt about her. She gave a quick smile and a little nod and went to the door.

Ross reached the counter. "Could I have the mail, Mrs. Brown?"

"Sure, Van." The woman smiled at him and turned to extract letters and circulars from the Square M box.

"See what Matt has to say," she ordered. "I couldn't read a word through the envelope. Paper's too thick."

Ross put down the sheaf of bills and uninteresting correspondence and opened the white envelope postmarked Chicago.

Dear Van: On the hoof again and aim to start home a week from today. Doc says I'll ride in a few weeks and am better than new. I know you're takin' good care of the ranch, pard. Matt.

"Well, land's sakes, I'm relieved," said Mrs. Brown, as Ross let her read the note. "I was worried about the old codger. He ought to be to town here by next Thursday or Friday if he starts like he says."

"Yes, ma'am."

Ross felt a load off his mind. At least it would be off when Old Matt came home.

He had worried a lot more than if he owned the Square M himself.

He realized that Miss Smothers had returned from the porch and was standing holding the bolt and her sample, waiting for Mrs. Brown to be done with Ross.

"Excuse me, I didn't aim to step in ahead of yuh," said Ross, making room.

"That's all right."

She put the bolt on the counter and Ross waited beside her.

"This is Van Ross, Miss Smothers," Mrs. Brown said, "He's runnin' the Square M ranch. Miss Smothers and her folks have moved in on the Kennet, Van."

Ross acknowledged the introduction politely. He felt the drawing power of the young woman and there was a silent understanding between them. He was a handsome youth and yet he had a man's sureness about him as well as a look of strength.

"I think I'll take five yards of this, Mrs. Brown," said Miss Smothers with feminine authority.

Van Ross looked at the bolt. It had a silky green sheen. "Excuse me but that don't match yore sample," he observed. "What yuh have is pink and the cloth's the color of spring grass."

She smiled again at him. "You see," she explained, "I have a shirtwaist I made and now I want a skirt that will look well with it. They won't be the same color at all. There's a dance in the town hall here a week from Saturday and I must have a new outfit for it. It's a Get Acquainted Dance."

"Oh." A light burst over Ross. "Funny yuh'd mention that dance but I just told the barkeep at Ed's I'd be there. Do yuh s'pose if I was yuh'd have a spare dance or two?"

"Yes, I think so." She was sure of him now and kept smiling while Mrs. Brown measured out the cloth for her.

"How far up the Kennet is yore folks' homestead?" asked Ross.

"About six miles," she replied.

"West side?"

MISS SMOTHERS nodded. She liked the rugged turn of Ross' jaw and the straight look to his eyes. He was a foot taller than she was but she had the feeling of a skillful driver handling a spirited horse. At first she had been a bit wary of him but it had taken only a few words to tell her she was in control. He had wildness in him but for her he would tame.

Something was bothering him now. She did not understand what it was but answered his questions. It had nothing to do with their budding personal relations, she felt.

"How many families on yore side of the river?"

"A dozen so far but more are coming. We've only been here a few days and are living in tents but we aim to put up buildings before winter. Why?"

"It's somethin' I been thinkin' of. Have yuh run into any fuss with an hombre named Dorset, who owns the Butternut Ranch?"

She stopped smiling and looked worried. "Yes, there was trouble between our men and some cowboys. Shots were fired and two men were hurt. We complained to Sheriff Myles."

Ross understood something. He knew why George Dorset was shoving his herds west away from the Kennet.

"Why, the fool must have been runnin' on open range there!" he concluded. "I thought he owned the land."

This put Dorset in a bad position. If Dorset did not own enough sections along the west bank of the stream then he was licked. The homesteaders would have legal title to their farms and Dorset, while he might kick up his heels and shoot them up, would have to retreat before them.

The Square M was safe. Dorset surely owned the Ruby range so that the Butternut would act as a cushion between the farmers and the Mathews holdings. At the worst Mathews could run barbed wire fences on his east boundary.

It was not strange that Ross had just heard about the invasion of the range for he had been very busy the past week and no riders had chanced to stop at the Square M. The settlers had crossed the Kennet only a few days ago to camp and start operations.

Miss Smothers was turned to Ross, looking up at him. He pulled back from his musing over Dorset's predicament and concentrated on the pleasanter aspect of the girl.

"I'm goin' to eat at Buck's, ma'am," he said. "Will yuh come and have dinner with me? I hate to have my grub all by myself."

A man in overalls and a straw hat came to the door. He was about fifty and his dark beard was clipped to shape his chin. When he saw Van Ross talking to the girl a look of alarm crossed his face. He came in and stood just by the door, frowning.

"Gertrude," he called sharply. "Come on." He kept watching Van Ross suspiciously.

"Just a jiffy, Dad," Miss Smothers replied.

"Come here right now," shouted her father angrily.

Ross realized that Smothers did not like seeing his daughter talking to a cowboy. There was fear in Smothers' attitude, a fear founded on previous experience with the range riders.

Gertrude took her time, waiting until Mrs. Brown had done up her package. "I'd enjoy the lunch," she told Ross, "but we've already eaten and Father may want to start home. Thank you, though. Maybe I'll see you a week from Saturday?"

"Yuh shore will. Let me tote yore parcel for you."

"No, that's all right. It's very light."

She turned and joined her father, who scowled and began to talk to her in a low voice as they walked outside. Gertrude looked around to give Ross a smile and a quick nod.

An Indian war hoop rang out in the hot afternoon and the thud of driving hoofs echoed in Main Street. Pistol shots banged and horses at the racks danced and pulled up their heads.

Van Ross followed the Smothers to the front porch. He slouched against a post, watching the Butternut roar into town, led by George Dorset. Half a dozen punchers were with the boss and they were making their arrival known by shooting in the air.

GERTRUDE and her father shrank back against the wall out of the way but another farmer was not quick enough. Dorset was on a big black mustang and he deliberately swerved so that the horse struck the man at the side of the road and knocked him flat. His head hit a protruding stone with a sickening sound and the farmer lay still while Dorset whirled on, his men in his dust.

The wanton bullying on Dorset's part angered Van Ross. It might have been Gertrude's father who was hurt and Dorset had gone out of his way to injure the man in the street. Smothers and a couple of other men ran to bend over the prostrate figure and a woman began to scream and hurried to join them.

Ross turned down the wooden sidewalk. Dorset and his riders pulled up in sliding stops and jumped off, dropping reins over the railing, ducking under.

"Dorset!" sang out Ross.

The Butternut chief heard him and looked up the way, seeing Ross' tall figure hurrying toward him. He turned and stood ready but seemed unsure of what to do. He had an expectant air.

Ross was mad clear through. He came within a few paces of Dorset and slowed. The Butternut men bunched behind Dorset. Ross knew them all, Slim Whitehall, Lou Ives, and the rest. They knew him, too, knew his speed and determination.

"I come to town to take care of yore claim on those cows and calves, Dorset," began Ross. He controlled his voice, a cold ring in it. "I got yore money for yuh. Yuh fired Tilly and he thought he was helpin' me out by rustlin' some cattle for me. And I reckon he aimed to pay yuh back for some of yore meanness."

Without waiting for Dorset's reply, Ross drew out the money and tossed it. Dorset caught it. He was puzzled and licked his crisp mustache, trying to understand.

"There's money for forty-three cows and forty-three calves at the market today," said Ross. "I'm payin' it because even though I didn't savvy what Tilly was up to I'm responsible as boss."

"Well, that's all right." Dorset stared at the money and finally stuffed it in his belt. "Come inside and I'll stand yuh a drink."

"No drinks with you, Dorset. Why did yuh ride down that hombre just now?"

Dorset's black eyes widened for a flicker and slitted again. "Shucks. Are yuh rootin' for fool hoemen?"

"I don't cotton to a bully and yuh're it, Dorset." Ross spoke coolly without raising his voice. "And speakin' of who's a fool, I say yuh're one. Yuh should have cinched title to that west Kennet River range. Yuh're pinched between the farmers and the Square M. But I s'pose yuh were too stingy to part with enough cash to buy in that land and now it's too late."

Dorset had a loud way with people he thought he could dominate and the straight talk enraged him. He had been drinking from a flask on the way to town and he was flushed. "Seems to me yuh'd smell nicer if yuh'd mind yore business, Ross!"

Ross liked a showdown and it was some time since he had felt such a thrill. There was real danger in bearding such a man as Dorset. Ross raised his hand and deliberately slapped Dorset across the face.

The smack of Ross' palm connecting with Dorset's flesh was as audible as a pistol shot. A dark welt came up where the blow had landed and Dorset stepped back, eyes flaming.

The Butternut boss stood between Van Ross and his men. None of the cowboys moved but froze as they bunched by the railing. Dorset had to do something about the deadly insult offered by Ross in front of the crew and even some of the farmers were watching from in front of the store. They had carried the senseless man to the porch and were working over him.

Dorset hit back, his fist driving for Ross' jaw. But Ross was too quick and the blow went wide past Ross' shoulder. As the heavy Butternut owner followed through, off balance with his weight forward, Ross caught him on the button and Dorset's head snapped back. A following left to the midriff completed the job and Dorset dropped to the sidewalk.

"Get up and fight, Dorset," ordered Ross. "Yuh ain't hurt much."

Dorset rose to a crouch. His teeth showed and he was boiling with fury. He wanted to draw a Colt and shoot down Ross but did not dare for he knew Ross' speed and skill with a gun. Dorset glanced from the corner of his eyes at

his men but the Butternut boss did not budge. The sort of rider who would stick with George Dorset would not jeopardize his life in such a situation. And Dorset knew that Ross would beat him to the draw. Even though Dorset's cowboys might kill Ross while the latter was disposing of the Butternut chief, Dorset would be coyote bait and perhaps one or two of his crew if Ross made a quick enough whirl. Dorset was not mad enough to commit suicide just to take Ross with him.

"Anybody else?" asked Ross impudently, keeping the center of the sidewalk, long hands easy at his hips.

Sheriff Myles came from the saloon and said, "What's goin' on out here?"

CHAPTER IV

Guns Speak

DORSET was inwardly relieved at the sheriff's intervention. Without a word he got up and turned away, going past Myles into Ed's place. The Butternut men moved gingerly around Ross and followed Dorset.

"I just paid Dorset for them cows and for somethin' else, Sheriff," drawled Ross.

He swung and ducked under the railing, crossing the dusty road to reach Buck's restaurant. Glancing toward the store he saw Gertrude standing in the gutter, staring his way. She had one hand to her mouth and was clutching her bundle under her other arm. Her attitude was one of alarm but when she saw Ross looking at her she waved to him. He waved back and went in, ordering the menu for he was overdue for a meal.

Ross took his time, finishing two plates of ham and eggs and four cups of coffee. The apple pie was fresh and he consumed two large slices. He rolled a cigaret and took it easy, chatting with Buck Holman who owned the place.

"I heard Mathews is comin' back next week," said Buck to Ross.

The news had spread quickly from the store. Some customer had come in and informed Buck of Matt's impending return. They spoke about the invasion of the farmers along the west bank of the Kennet.

"I always thought Dorset owned the range," remarked Ross.

"Me too. It was a mighty stupid play for Dorset to let it slip. A few years ago he could have bought it in cheap or even had his men file on sections for him and then turn it over. Those folks are the kind who stay and the Kennet water is good. They'll irrigate farther and farther back till they're stopped by owned range. They just moved in and it was a surprise to all of us for we thought Dorset held title to the land."

"Dorset's pushin' west along the Ruby, but he can't go very far for he runs into the Square M. He'll have to pull in his horns some. Can't support as many cows as he did and he'll never be able to expand. He's cut off in all directions." The problems of the range held a keen interest for Van Ross.

"Well, I'll have more customers," nodded Buck. "There's twenty farmers to one rancher as far as I go. Just the same I hate to see the old days goin'." Holman shook his head. He was older than Ross and a friend of Old Matt's.

The little bell over the door tinkled and Ross glanced around. He stood up quickly as he saw Gertrude Smothers coming in, and he stepped toward her. She came quickly to him and her face was grave.

"I'm glad yuh decided to join me," said Ross. "Sit down and eat."

"No," she said. "I'm not hungry. I have something to tell you."

After a quick look at the girl Buck went back to his counter and Gertrude took the chair Ross held for her.

"After what happened we were afraid and we all decided we'd better drive home together," she said. "Father went around back of the store to see to our team and he thought you should know he saw Dorset talking with a tough in the alley behind the saloon."

"That's mighty white of yore dad," said Ross. "And you are all right. Did yore father say what this hombre looks like?"

Gertrude nodded. She was excited and fearful. "He's much bigger than you are. He wears a yellow hat and a checked vest and leather trousers. I think they call him Ansel. He was with some of

Dorset's cowboys when they shot us up the other day."

Ross shook his head. "I don't savvy Ansel. He must be a new one."

"There he is now!" said Gertrude, pointing out the window.

Ross swung and stared. A bruiser of a man with bowed legs and a mustard-colored Stetson on his burly head had come to the street and set himself in a slouch against the building wall across the way. He bulked in his range clothing and the runner of his chinstrap was loose, the guide dangling under his bulldog jaw. The sunlight touched the oiled guns in his holsters. Ross had never seen Ansel before and concluded the man had recently come to the Kennet and Ruby range.

HE STOOD up but Gertrude seized his arm. "No, please," she begged. "Don't go out there. You'll be safer if you go out the back way and get your horse."

Ross blinked. Sneaking out a back door was not his style.

"How bad is that farmer hurt, Gertrude?" he inquired.

"He'll be all right," she answered. "We're going to take him home in our wagon. He's still dazed."

Sheriff Myles came from Ed's and crossed to his office, going inside. Ansel's eyes followed the officer but came back to Buck's door.

"You go on with yore dad," said Ross gently.

"You'll be careful?" she insisted.

"Mighty careful," he promised gravely.

He wanted her out of the way of possible stray lead. Dorset had sicked Ansel on him, no doubt of that. A straw was enough to show how the wind blew. Afraid to try the job himself, Dorset had entrusted it the the hireling gunman.

Ross let Gertrude out the front door and when she emerged Ansel watched her while she walked quickly up the street. Again Ansel looked back at the restaurant and it was obvious the tough was waiting for Van Ross to come forth.

Ross gave the girl plenty of time to get clear. He fixed a cigarette and smoked it, figuring what he would do. There was no guessing just where Ansel would pick his fight but Ross would be prepared. Under the table he checked his Colts and made sure they were loose in the holsters and the necessary cylinders loaded.

A thought occurred to him and puzzled his alert mind. "Funny," he muttered. "This will be the second time today. I wonder if Myles was wrong about that drygulcher?"

The bullets which had missed him earlier on his way to town had been fired on Butternut range. Why should Dorset want him killed, if it had been one of Dorset's men? He remembered how queer had been Dorset's manner when Ross had first approached the Butternut chief to pay for the cattle.

"He was keyed up and acted like he was afeared I aimed to start somethin', before I said anything."

He pushed back his hat to scratch his head in a perplexed gesture. He had jumped to the conclusion, when Gertrude brought her warning, that Dorset had sicked Ansel on him because of the fight in town. But this did not jibe with the drygulcher business. Dorset had been sore about the stolen cattle yet had come over with the sheriff to make a formal complaint.

Ross gave up for the moment. Dorset had a devious mind, he knew that, and he sensed something complicated was going on. He would have to figure out what Dorset was up to. The Butternut was being pressed by the farmers and while Dorset might try some bullying tactics on the hoemen in a forlorn attempt at scaring them away, Dorset must know such a game was hopeless in the end. Myles and the law would side with the newcomers.

First he must show Dorset that Ansel could be handled. It was a challenge he would not refuse.

He stood up and tossed his cigaret into the cuspidor and opened the front door. He could see that Ansel was alert and the big tough looked at Ross as he came out on the sidewalk.

The sun was well down and the day nearly gone. No hurry about getting back to the ranch, for work would be about over. He could make his ride after dark fell.

The sun was in Ansel's eyes and behind Ross as he slowly crossed the street. He stared at Ansel as he ducked under the continuous railing to which horses could be tied and which kept the animals from encroaching on the sidewalk. But Ansel was not ready. He

thought that Ross meant to cross in front of him and enter Ed's but instead Ross turned left and went into the Steer's Head, another saloon.

ROSS glanced through the front window. Ansel hitched up his gunbelt and turned to follow and Ross knew the moment was close at hand.

There were a few citizens in the bar. Ross ordered a drink and stood with his left elbow on the counter, partially turned to watch the entrance. Ansel bulked huge in the open doorway and after a brief pause the tough came slowly inside. He draped himself on the bar a few paces from Ross and pounded with a fist for service.

Suddenly Ansel sniffed loudly and shouted, "I smell polecat! I won't have it where I'm drinkin'. Get out!"

He was looking straight at Ross with his small, inflamed eyes. Flesh bulged around them and gave him a piggish expression. His chin protruded and he was dirty and needed a shave.

Ross stared back and stepped toward the bruiser who outweighed him by fifty pounds.

"Yuh mean me, don't yuh, Ansel?" he said quietly.

Ansel was deceived by the calm manner. He was crude and understood only one thing, which was brute force.

"I guess yuh savvy yore breed," snarled Ansel.

He was poised for a draw and watched Ross for the same. Ross had fought such men before. While they were quick with a Colt they had no knowledge of fist fighting and were astonished at it and unable to counter except by recovering and going for a gun after catching a blow.

Ross feinted with his right, which Ansel was intent upon, and then lashed a left to Ansel's flattened nose.

Ansel was staggered but the bar saved him. He was very quick at drawing and his pistol whipped into the air and exploded.

But Ross had made it a breath ahead of Ansel. Quick as he was, Ross always had the nerve to take the extra fraction of time vital to aim. Ansel, rattled by the stinging punch, had thought only of getting off his shot and he had missed. The bullet sang past Ross' thigh and cut into the floor down the bar.

A man yelled in alarm and everybody ducked out of the line of fire.

Ross' pistol kicked against his palm. He could have killed Ansel but instead he put a slug through the gunman's right shoulder. Ansel was whipped around by the heavy lead and his arm dropped.

Ansel began to curse and the fear and expectation of death came into the piggish eyes. Ross had him pinned, the Colt hammer back under his thumb. There was a faint smile on Ross' lips as he faced Ansel.

"Outside, Ansel," ordered Ross. "Yuh don't smell like a polecat but yuh need a bath mighty bad. Beat it."

Ansel was breathing hard from shock. He did not move fast enough to suit Ross and Ross grasped him by the collar and pushed him toward the door, raising a spurred boot to hurry Ansel on his way. Ansel stumbled and fell across the sill, shrieking as he landed on his wounded shoulder.

Ross trailed him outside. The shots had been heard and George Dorset and his men had run out of Ed's in the hope of seeing Ross' downfall. Instead they saw the beaten Ansel staggering to his horse, fear on the stupid gunman's pig face. Ansel pulled himself to his saddle and rode away without looking back.

Sheriff Myles hurried from his office and started toward the scene of the disturbance. Ross strolled to the other saloon, paused and stared at Dorset but the Butternut chief's eyes slid off.

"Why don't yuh try it yoreself, George?" said Ross. "Or maybe that was you who shot at me from the bushes."

"What yuh mean?" muttered Dorset uncomfortably. He was held by his growing fear of Ross.

Ross stepped up on the porch of Ed's Place and lurched heavily against Dorset. He nearly knocked Dorset off the stoop but Dorset did nothing about it. As Ross swung through the entry Dorset crossed the walk and ducked under the rail. His men followed and they mounted and left town.

Please, Folks, Be Extra Careful This Year! ONLY *YOU* CAN PREVENT FOREST FIRES!

CHAPTER V

Enemy Ranch

CURIOUSLY the sheriff looked after the Butternut and then followed Ross into Ed's. Ross was at the bar and the men in there watched him with respect.

"How about one on me, Ross?" said Ken Ince, a rancher who lived south of Whistleville. "That Ansel's been actin' nasty around town ever since he pulled in."

"What happened?" demanded the sheriff, moving up.

"That Ansel sidewinder who's been hangin' around took a shot at Ross after pickin' a fuss," explained Ince. "Ross put a slug through his shoulder. You were too easy with the cuss, Ross. Yuh should have killed him."

Witnesses had seen Ansel start the fight. Ross drank with Ince and Myles and a small knot of acquaintances. The bartender poured one for himself and joined the gathering.

"I hear Matt's comin' back next week," said the proprietor.

"Yeah," nodded Ross. "And I'll be mighty glad to see him. Seems to me there's been nothin' but trouble since the boss left."

"Yuh'll be Matt's pardner when he gets home," said Ince.

"What makes yuh think so?" Ross was rather surprised for he had said nothing about Matt's promise.

"Oh, it's mighty plain," explained Ince. "And Matt dropped a hint or two when he was leavin' town on his way to Chicago. He puts a lot of trust in yuh, Ross, and he's right."

"There's that purty little homestead girl," remarked the barkeep. "She looks right excited about something."

Ross glanced from the front window. Gertrude was on the other side of the street but walking up and down the sidewalk and looking across the way at the saloon into which Ross had gone. It was out of the question for a lady to come inside such a place.

"I'll be back in a while, gents," said Ross, and went out.

He crossed to join the young woman and there was relief in her pretty eyes when she saw his smile.

"You're not hurt, then?" she said. "I couldn't tell. I heard the shots and saw you go in the saloon."

"I'm fine. Ansel's the one who got hurt."

He saw Smothers up the road, watching. "Come along and I'll take yuh back to yore wagon," said Ross.

Smothers waited for them and there was no fear of Ross now in his eyes. He nodded and held out his hand.

"You are a friend, Ross," he said.

Gertrude looked anxious until Ross took her father's hand.

"Thanks for the warnin' on Ansel, Smothers. If Dorset bothers yuh any more send me word at the Square M."

The new settlers were ready to return to their tent homes on the upper Kennet. The injured man lay on blankets in a flat wagon. Ross rode a half mile with them, Gertrude sitting on the box by her father. Then he said so-long and returned to town.

It was dark when he hit the road for the ranch. Aware of Dorset's animosity he did not travel on the beaten track but kept to the open range. There was a moon up and a drygulcher would have an easy time spotting an approaching horseman on the turns.

When he reached the Square M a lamp burned low in the house but the boys had turned in two hours ago. Quietly he took care of Chesty and then washed up and had a final smoke before going to bed. He was worn out from the long day and the excitement and was too tired to think much.

IN THE morning his mind was busy clicking again. Matt was coming home and he would have but a few more days with the great load of the ranch on him. There were many things he had wished to accomplish before Mathews got back but some he had had to let slide although he had pushed through other projects.

Broken equipment to be mended, new fence sections to be erected, repairs on house and other buildings, all these had been on his mind, besides the hard job of seeing to the cattle and horses, to his waddies, and the paper work that went with it. Accidents and emergencies had

come up and he had had to handle them.

He felt a lot older than he had when Old Matt had ridden away. Responsibility had settled on him, and now he was thinking about Gertrude and the world looked brighter and very interesting. If Mathews actually took him in as partner Ross could afford a wife.

He drove off his personal affairs and considered Dorset. Beyond the threat to his own life he wondered what Dorset was up to. There was just one way for Dorset to gain the room he must have since the settlers had pushed him off the Kennet.

"I'll have to watch the cuss," decided Ross. "The Square M is a juicy plum. Dorset could shore use it."

Yet Matt and Ross stood between this goal and the Butternut. "He did try for me," thought Ross.

After breakfast he called the boys together as was his habit, assigning jobs to them. He was short of hands and could ill afford to detail a man to spy on the Butternut but considered it vital.

"Barney," he said to a tall young cowboy with tow hair and gray eyes, "yuh snake over to the heights this side of the Butternut. Keep outta sight. If yuh see Dorset and any number of his riders headed this way I want yuh to scoot in and report to me, savvy?"

"I savvy," nodded Barney. He stamped out his cigarette in the corral dust as he fixed his rope to throw the loop over the mustang he wanted.

Ross gave out tasks to the others. They worked through the long day and Barney came in after dark, hungry and bored.

"Nothin' doin'," said Barney. "I seen Dorset around the ranch, that's all."

Ross put another man on guard that night but there was no alarm. He sent Barney back on his job near the Butternut next day, but again had no alarming report. "I wonder if I went off half-cocked?" he mused that night as he prepared to turn in. He had a sentry out once more.

The evening of the fourth day on duty as an observer Barney reported to Ross, "Dorset rode off with eight men this afternoon," Barney said. "They didn't head for Whistleville but took the southeast trail."

Valeville would lie that way, but Dorset might well have business at the railroad stop or farther on. Ross almost decided to call off the lookout for he sorely needed Barney around the Square M. But he considered it best to take no chances. He would maintain his preparedness and state of defense. Old Matt was due back in a couple of days and it would be just too bad if Dorset struck at the last moment.

Thursday evening and Barney came straight to Ross, who was in the office poring over a record book.

"Dorset ain't back yet," reported Barney. "But I seen Dave Tilly. The cuss passed me and near run over me when he came out of the woods and made for the Butternut."

"Tilly's at the Butternut? Did he stick there?" Ross was astounded, and for a moment he was unable to think clearly.

"Yeah, made himself at home. He was hobnobbin' with Dorset's segundo and with the rest of 'em."

Ross had to think it out. Dorset supposedly had quarreled with Tilly and fired him. Tilly had come to Ross with the story and Dorset had corroborated it. It was Tilly who had admitted doing the rustling for the Square M and Ross had paid Dorset nearly a thousand dollars of his own money to settle the matter.

ROSS ate his supper but with a preoccupied air. He was growing angrier as he realized he had been made a fool of by the Butternut. How Dorset and his men must have snickered over his paying the money in, even though Ross had punched Dorset about the farmer.

Tilly had been in cahoots all the way through with Dorset.

After a smoke Ross called Fred Young, gave his orders, and saddling Chesty he rode toward the Butternut.

Dorset's place stood on the Ruby. It was larger than the Square M and built in hacienda style. There were lights in the main rooms and the bunkhouse. Ross left Chesty well out and flitted near, making few sounds. He meant to scout the ranch and if he could get his hands on Dave Tilly he intended to wring out the truth or Tilly's neck. A thousand dollars was a lot of money and besides a man hated being made a fool of.

Somebody was strumming a guitar and giving forth what he considered musical sounds. Ross reached a side window on

the dark side of the house and peeked through. Tilly was slouched in a chair, his booted feet up, playing the instrument. A cigarette burned in a tray on the table and he had a bottle and glass by him. Several Butternut waddies were in there with Tilly, all friends.

For an hour Ross lurked close, hoping that Tilly would break loose from his comrades.

He could hear snatches of talk now and then when Tilly paused between songs.

"Yuh reckon the boss will be back tonight?" one man said.

"It was s'posed to be Friday but Dorset took no chances. He was there ahead of time."

The talk puzzled Ross. Friday. That was the day Mathews was scheduled to arrive.

Ross was patient. He waited and it was around eleven o'clock when he caught the sound of approaching horsemen. They came from the southeast, and straight to the hacienda. When Tilly and the others came out on the long porch to greet them, Ross saw George Dorset dismount in the light circle.

"Bring him in, boys!" Dorset ordered.

Dorset's crew carried in a blanket-wrapped shape and Ross waited till they were all inside before resuming his post under the side window. He could see Dorset who was dirty and coated with dust. Dorset was unshaven and baggy under the eyes inflamed from lack of sleep and grit particles. The Butternut boss had had a long, hard run.

"Lucky we got there when we did," said Dorset as he poured himself a drink. "The old cuss come home a day early."

Ross watched Dorset pull the blanket from the victim's head. By this time it was no surprise to see it was Matt Mathews, owner of the Square M. Ross's fury boiled in him and his hand itched.

Dorset pushed down the bandanna gag and Mathews looked up defiantly, his old eyes blinking in the lamplight. Matt appeared wan and dragged out but he was recuperating from his operation and Dorset had not handled him gently.

"Yuh can't get away with this, Dorset," growled Mathews. "Ross will see yuh pay up."

"Ross will be dead soon, Matt. He can't help yuh."

Tilly went to the desk and brought some papers. "I got everything ready, George." He pushed forward a bottle of ink and a pen.

"Yuh aimed to take Ross in as yore pardner, Matt," said Dorset. "Well, it won't do. We been shoved off the Kennet and I need more room. I don't control any water now. Yuh even own the sources of the Ruby and could cut me off entirely. I ain't takin' that and I mean to protect myself. Any man would. Figgered I'd get the Square M with yuh dead but I don't want Ross around. I'd never get the cussed water I need if Ross stayed. It's life or death for me."

"Just what do yuh want me to do?" demanded Mathews.

HE HAD lost weight and looked frail but there was life and fight in his eyes.

"Sign over that hill section where the Ruby makes up," ordered Dorset. "That's all." He pushed forward the papers.

"I can't see without my specs and yuh busted 'em when yuh jumped me outside Valeville," objected Matt.

"Never mind. Sign these four lines, and I'll let yuh go."

Mathews folded his arms and raised his chin. Dorset hit the old fellow hard in the nose and knocked his head back and forth.

"I'll beat yore ears off if yuh don't do like I tell yuh, Matt!" Dorset snarled.

Dorset's idea was clear to Ross. Dorset had to have the Ruby and would try for the Perch and Square M as well. Old Matt might not last long but with Ross in the picture Dorset had acted.

Ross decided that Tilly had been planted at the Square M as a spy and to pretend to rustle Butternut cattle which would put Ross in wrong and explain why Ross had been killed, some fine day when Ross was found with a bullet through him. Dorset's devious, evil mind would work that way.

Dorset whipped out a Colt and cocked it. He aimed at Matt's head in his anger. "I'll kill yuh, Matt, so help me!" He added, "I got a sample of yore signature. I could forge it myself and I'll do it if yuh don't agree."

Rage loomed hot and high in Ross but he was cool and calculating. He raised his gun and took his stance. "Dorset!" he called sharply.

His voice made them all jump and Dorset looked away from Matt and half

turned toward the open window. The Butternut boss knew it was Ross, he knew who was out there. With a screech of hate Dorset whirled to shoot, hoping to hit Ross.

The heavy bullet ranged through the window opening but Ross was too experienced to be in the center. Off to one side he let go and Dorset shuddered and went down, a bluish hole in his temple.

Old Matt raised his legs and kicked Tilly in the side, just in time to wreck Tilly's shot at Ross. Tilly's bullet cut the wood of the frame and Ross downed Tilly with his second one. A couple of wild shots from the Butternut men went wide and Ross hit a third man.

It was enough and they stampeded, running for the doors. Ross cut off the light with a bullet to the chimney for he feared they might kill Mathews on the way out. Shouts reached him and he called back. "Square M, this way!" Barney, Fred Young and the other cowboys from the Square M came tearing in. They had been waiting nearby, hidden as Ross had ordered.

Scattered shots rang out around the Butternut but Dorset's followers had no fight left in them. They were running for it, appalled by Ross and the Square M, leaderless since Dorset's death and afraid of the consequences.

When all was clear Ross went inside and lighted up. Old Matt grinned and was mighty glad to see him as he shook Ross's hand.

"That cuss Dorset had it comin', Ross. He wanted the Square M."

Ross nodded. He looked over the papers which Dorset had tried to force Matt to sign.

"Yeah, he tried to get it all, Matt. This is a quit-claim deed to all yore land. He'd have killed yuh after."

Mathews watched Ross bend over Dorset and find the moneybelt. He looked surprised when he saw Ross counting out bills.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Dorset owes me for forty-three cows and forty-three calves," explained Ross. "I'm just collectin'."

Old Matt was weak but he could stand up. He put an arm around Van Ross's shoulders,

"Come on, let's ride home, pardner," he said.

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"I snuck up behind the killer, got him by the wrist, and he pulled loose, droppin' that gun," Gabby explained to the sheriff

HORSE SENSE

By JACKSON COLE

If a man is in jail charged with a murder, being an expert at roping certainly can't be of much help to him, unless —

BEN ROURKE came out slowly from behind the counter in the office of the Cattle Buying Agency and walked to the door. A rider, leading a pack horse, was just pulling up at the hitchrail that fronted his building. The lifeless body of a man was tied to the pack animal.

Rourke stepped out on the boardwalk in front of his place. Undertaker Vic Wayburn, whose parlor occupied the adjoining half of Rourke's partitioned building, was just dismounting from the lead horse.

"Looks like some bad luck," Rourke commented grimly, for he knew that when Wayburn went after bodies, he usually brought them back in a small, covered bed-wagon. That Wayburn was bringing in a body on horseback indicated that he'd had to go out into rough country to get it.

"It's bad luck, sure enough," said the undertaker, his long, thin face unhappy. Despite the fact that ministering to the dead was his business, he acted as if he could never get used to it. "It's a bullet through the head that finished this one off. And what's worse, it's Hap Goode."

"Hap Goode?" Rourke said, and he stepped around the pack animal for a look at the corpse of the young rancher tied to the saddle, head and arms dangling limply down. It wasn't until Rourke actually saw the face that he could believe Hap Goode was dead.

"Why, he was in my office only yesterday afternoon." He wagged his head in regret. "Sold me them fifty head of cattle and was tellin' me how much the money was goin' to mean to him—that he was aimin' to get a new bought dress for his wife, some toys for his baby, and send away and buy them store teeth for his old father."

"It was the money that got him killed," said Wayburn, busily at work untying the body. "Goode's shirt was ripped open and the money-belt he wore under it was rifled. Looks like we can notch up one more victim for the Phantom River Kid."

Ben Rourke didn't want to see any more. He turned away. Tall and broad-shouldered, he looked like a range hand despite the fact that he wore a white shirt, and it was plain from the callouses on his palms and the powerful muscles of his arms that he had not long before led a more strenuous life than occupied him now. He went inside the Agency office and took his perch on the high stool behind the counter.

Distantly, he heard the whistle of a railroad locomotive, and as he sat there, thinking, he rolled himself a cigarette. Ever since the railroad had built a spur to Phantom River and made that town a shipping point for cattle, robberies and killings, such as this one that had just claimed the life of Hap Goode, had been on the increase. And there had been a particular jump in the number of robberies of ranchers, returning home flush with cash after selling off their herds in Phantom River.

Ben Rourke walked to his plate-glass, front window. At the end of the street were the newly built corrals and holding pens of the Cattle Buying Agency for which he worked. And, up and down the street, he could count a half dozen new buildings in process of construction—evidence of Phantom River's new prosperity. One of the largest of the structures going up was an impressive stone bank. The massive safe that would go inside it was now resting, crated, at the bank's rear where it had been unloaded from the railroad flatcars that ran, conveniently, just behind the buildings lining the street.

As Rourke watched, a quickly stepping short man came walking across the street and entered the Agency office. He wore a flat-crowned hat and, apparently, never used anything but a scissors on his beard for he always had what looked like a heavy, three-day growth. He was Deputy Small who, at the moment, was the only active lawman in Phantom River.

Small nodded in greeting, and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "The sheriff wants to see you."

It was not a statement that left an opening for refusal. It was a command and Small delivered it without a smile, and stood there waiting.

"Sure," Ben Rourke tossed away his cigarette. "Did he say what about?"

"You'll find out when you see him," Small said.

Rourke took a sign that said BACK IN FIVE MINUTES, and hung it in the door window. He stepped through the door after Small then, locked it, and crossed the street with the deputy.

"I reckon you know what happened to Hap Goode?" he offered.

"You reckon right," Small said, and his mouth shut tight.

The sheriff's house was a small clapboard structure that fronted hard on the street's boardwalk, but it had a side yard in which cosmos and marigold and poppies bloomed. Sheriff Cecil Trump had been in ill health for a year now, and it struck Ben Rourke that Deputy Small did a very inadequate job of filling the senior lawman's shoes.

Small shoved into the sheriff's house without ceremony, nodded to Mrs. Trump who was in the kitchen, and led the way into the bedroom at the front of the house where the sheriff sat propped up in bed. Ben Rourke recognized the man who sat at the lawman's bedside. He was an ineffectual and womanish sort of character he knew only as "Gabby."

Gabby stopped talking, apparently in the middle of a sentence, when they en-

tered. Sheriff Trump looked solemn, and paler than Rourke had ever seen him. He paused to take a pill from a bottle on a small table beside his bed and down it with a swallow of water. Rourke noticed there was a spyglass on the table.

"You want to see me, Sheriff?"

The lawman ran his fingers through his tousled, thick hair. Though he had not yet turned fifty, his sweeping mustache and head of hair were a glistening white.

"Hap Goode was waylaid and killed last night," he said. "He was robbed of fifteen hundred dollars. You want to tell him about it, Gabby?"

"Ain't much to tell," said Gabby, a simpering smile on his lips. He took a gun that he had on his lap and placed it on the bedspread. "I jest happened to be ridin' a back-trail late—like I told the sheriff here—and I heard a commotion back in the brush. I reined over closer, and sure enough there was the Phantom River Kid. The Kid must've just shot poor Hap and was busy robbin' him. So I snuck up and grabbed the killer. I got him by the wrist and twisted and he dropped his gun. But then he pulled loose, slipperier than an eel, and high-tailed, and I lost sight of him in the bushes."

Ben Rourke had picked up the gun Gabby had put on top of the bedspread and was examining it curiously. Now, the sheriff turned to him.

"You reckernize that gun? It's the one the Phantom River Kid dropped when Gabby here jumped him."

"Sure, I recognize it," Rourke said, a bit irritably and tossed it back on the quilted spread. "It's not hard for a man to recognize a weapon when it has his name engraved on its butt. So what do you want to say—that I'm the Phantom River Kid? It so happens that gun was stolen from my office. I often step out without bothering to lock the door."

Sheriff Cecil Trump smoothed his mustache thoughtfully. "You used to be a tophand cowboy up in Montana, Rourke," he said carefully. "Howcome you give up ridin' when you showed up down here in Texas?"

Ben Rourke felt a hot flush spread from his cheeks to the roots of his hair. "And howcome do you know all this about my personal history?"

"I know because it's a sheriff's business to know some things," Trump retorted quickly. "And I've had an especial good reason for lookin' into your past, Rourke. Answer me this. Who has a better occasion than you to know what ranchers have just sold a passel of cattle and are headin' home with a fat bankroll?"

ANGER boiled so fiercely inside Rourke he could not speak for the moment. He didn't want to speak. He had learned from sad experience what messes a quick, hot tongue could get a man into. The sheriff took Rourke's moment of silence to add another point to his charge. "I know why you left Montana, Rourke," he said. "You killed a man up there."

"I killed a thief," Rourke snapped back. "In a fair fight. And I came down here because I didn't want to get involved with settlin' with his pards who stacked up like they might have itchy trigger-fingers." Angrily, he pointed at the spyglass on the table. "And while we're askin' questions, what's that for?"

"For lookin' out the window," Trump said. "I study people ridin' into town."

"And maybe it's for watchin' what ranchers come into my office across the street? Or the brands of the cattle that are being penned up in my company's corrals?"

Deputy Small clipped a curse, and Gabby rose tautly from his seat on the bed. Sheriff Trump's eyes hardened and his mouth drew into a hard line.

"Calm down, Rourke," he said firmly. "Don't go to pawin' the sod. We didn't bring you over here for accusations. We just wanted to get straight what you knew. Now get outside and cool off."

Ben Rourke went out. Crossing the street, he cast an unwitting glance at the potted palm and fern filled window of Wayburn's Undertaking Parlor. Then he entered his own place, taking the BACK IN FIVE MINUTES sign out of the door.

Briefly, he checked over the invoices on the Circle B herd which had been loaded earlier that afternoon. At eight that night an engine would be in to couple onto those and other cars for the haul to Atchison and Kansas City. Rourke had just locked the invoices in the file when a girl entered.

"Hi, Ben," she said, and after looking about to verify that no one was passing at the moment, she kissed him swiftly.

"How are you, Susie?" Ben said, his heart a little lighter at the mere sight of her.

Susan Brown was a small, blond girl with delicate features and hands, but yet she had the sturdiness of an active ranch girl who could ride, shoot, or take a dally with the best of them. The Circle B herd that had been loaded that day was her father's, and it was Ben's hope that he'd soon have enough cash so that he could honestly accept the partnership he offered and take Susan for his wife.

"Things aren't so good," Susan said now. "I'm worried."

"About us?" Ben asked, feeling a sudden quickening of fear.

She shook her blond head. "No, about father. He's determined to ride back to the ranch tonight, in spite of what happened to Hap Goode only last night."

"Your dad will be carryin' the money with him, I suppose?"

"All six thousand dollars of it," Susan Brown exclaimed in dismay. "Oh, I wish the bank were built already so people here wouldn't have to take chances like this."

"Your dad probably knows what he's doin'," Ben tried to comfort her. "Since the Phantom River Kid struck last night, I guess he figures it isn't likely he'd be out prowlin' again tonight."

"That's what father says. And he plans to take the shortcut through the pines. He'll be leaving about eight. He says that nobody knows that trail the way he does, or could catch up with him once it's dark."

"Possibly," Ben said, not voicing his belief that old Oscar Brown was inclined to overconfidence. "Look, Susie. You tell your dad to wait for me, that I'll ride with him out to the ranch tonight—just in case I might be needed. But I want you to ride along home now. Understand?"

"Why not?" Susan Brown smiled, took Ben's hand and squeezed it. "I feel much better. Frankly, I was hoping you'd offer to ride with father, Ben. But I didn't want to ask. I thought you'd think I was being silly about the danger."

He stepped with her out onto the boardwalk, and watched as she walked up the street to the livery for her horse. She made a trim little figure, and he loved her so much it hurt him inside.

Undertaker Wayburn came out, just as Rourke was turning back into his own office. He winked a greeting at Rourke, and as he went on up the street, Rourke noticed that there was some sort of white powder on the man's ear.

Without thinking, Ben Rourke sniffed. There was always an odor of formaldehyde or disinfectant about Wayburn, it seemed to him. The white powder was probably something he used in his work. Ben Rourke looked at his watch. It was already after six, and time he was closing up shop for the day.

He didn't become aware of anything strange brewing until he went to Emma's Kitchen for his supper. At the hotel, where he had gone to wash up, he had noticed that Luke, the desk clerk, didn't return his nod of greeting, but he didn't make much of it for he knew that Luke was rather absentminded and inclined to preoccupation. Nor did he pay much mind to the way the cowboys, hunkered down in front of the Mercantile, kept their eyes hard on him as he passed, and abruptly became silent. He merely had the feeling that they must have been talking about him.

But when he took a stool at Emma's, and Chris Olafson and his foreman got up and moved down to the farther end of the counter, taking their enchiladas and chili with them, he sensed what was afoot.

"Don't let it rile you," Emma whispered to him. "It's jest that Hap Goode was so well liked around these parts."

And then it was as clear as rain. Gabby had been spreading the word around about him. It had probably made a juicy, gossipy story of just the kind Gabby liked. There would be the part about his taking a gun with Ben Rourke's name on it away from the Phantom River Kid. And there would be the added part about Ben Rourke's having shaken the dust of Montana from his heels after killing a man up there.

Ben suddenly had no more appetite for supper. Shoving away the plate Emma had set down for him, he dropped a dollar on the counter and turned outside. Then, for the second time that day, he saw short, unshaven Deputy Small crossing the street toward him.

The stocky officer pulled up in front of him, planting his two boots firmly.

"I'd advise yuh not to make no ruckus, Rourke. Come easy."

"Come where?" Ben said.

"Sheriff Trump has given me my orders. You're to be locked up, pendin' further investigation into the robbin' and killin' of Hap Goode."

"Has Trump mebbeso been watching me with his spyglass?" Ben taunted. "He seemed to know exactly where to send you to find me."

Ben Rourke became aware of the gathering crowd of cowboys and townsmen along the boardwalk, watching silently.

"Okay, lead away," he said then.

"If yuh had any savvy," Deputy Small whispered between tightly clenched teeth, "yuh'd be glad we was lockin' yuh up. 'Member what happened in this town about a month ago?"

Ben Rourke did not have to think very hard to remember that. Lynch law had dealt out quick retribution to a horse-thief. It had seemed particularly brutal justice to Ben, for the horse had been worth hardly more than ten dollars, and the thief had been a druñken range-bum. The lynching itself had been as cowardly an exhibition of cruelty and bloodlust as had ever made a decent person's blood boil. The poor devil had been dragged off behind the very horse he had stolen. Then he had been hanged on the ground, his neck snapped by a rope tied to the base of a tree, the other end jerked by the horse. His body had not been found until buzzards had spread the news.

Deputy Small locked Ben Rourke in the one cell of the frame jail, locked the structure's front door and left. If Small had been as anxious for his prisoner's safety as he had pretended, Rourke knew, he would have remained behind in the jail's tiny front office, a scattergun at ready across his knees. But Rourke wasn't particularly concerned about that. What he was remembering was that it would shortly be eight o'clock, and that Susan's father would be heading through dark woodland with six thousand dollars in his pocket. With the Phantom River Kid loose, and on the prowl, it was no trip for Oscar Brown to make—unescorted.

Rourke's eyes took in his cell. It was bare, save for a bunk on one side and a slop bucket on the other. He climbed up on the end of the bunk and looked out of the cell's one, barred window. Despite the fact that the building was frame, he saw, it was constructed of heavy oak timbers that were as solid and unmovable as rock.

Rourke tested the window bars. They were of one-inch iron, sunk into cross-pieces that measured at least sixteen by sixteen. Rourke had heard tales of how cowboys, in just such a predicament as his, had whistled to their horses which —by some miracle—had been conveniently ground-hitched nearby. Then they had only to take the lariat from the saddle, tie one end to a bar and the other to the pommel, and give their expertly trained cowponies the command to pull away. As simple as that.

Rourke shook his head troubledly. He would gladly have welcomed the chance to exercise such horse sense and escape. The only hitch was that his own horse was at the moment securely stabled at the livery, and that there were no horses within his view and likely to be none, except iron horses, for the railroad tracks ran directly behind the jail.

Abruptly, Ben Rourke whistled low and stepped down off the bunk. In another moment he was pulling away its battered, cornhusk pad that served as a mattress. From the way the bunk had sagged under his boots when he had stood on it, he had guessed it: The bunk had a spring of sorts, improvised from rope that was criss-crossed from one side slat to the other.

Ben had fashioned himself a six-ply line by the time the engine came chugging and huffing by to pick up the waiting stock cars. Since some of the cars were destined for Atchison and others for Kansas City, it required a little maneuvering and switching before they were assembled all in the right order, and on this Rourke counted. The first car that was backed to a momentary, stationary siding behind the jail gave him his chance. Despite the fact that it was nearly two feet away, he succeeded in making fast to the iron ladder that climbed up the car's side.

Rourke held his breath then as the car began to roll slowly forward. The six-ply rope drew taut, its knots hardening with the tension. No rope, it seemed, could stand that terrific strain. He watched the individual strands thin under the pull. He heard the snorting puff of smoke from the train's stack, as its drivers pistoned forward. And then, before his eyes, the iron bar bent at the middle, its ends slipping protestingly up from the slots into which they were

sunk, the huge timber itself cracking under the strain.

And then the bar was yanked away, as a dentist might have pulled an offending tooth, and Ben Rourke saw before him a full ten-inch gap in the remaining bars. In Ben's desperation, a bigger man than himself could have squeezed through.

Ten minutes later, his horse beside him, a gun-belt strapped about his middle, Ben Rourke crouched in the shadows of a cattle chute at the edge of town, the building that housed his own Cattle Buying Agency and Wayburn's Undertaking Parlor in view. A pair of horses were tied up there at its front rail. Oscar Brown, he knew, would certainly have heard about his imprisonment and would therefore soon be leaving for his ranch —alone. Already darkness was deepening in the east, creeping westward.

Ben had considered meeting Brown and riding openly with him. But then he had realized such a course might scare off any attack the Phantom River Kid planned, and Ben was certain he planned one. Once and for all, the Phantom River Kid had to be apprehended dead to rights, and the menace he offered to the honest ranchers of this range swept away for all time.

Hoofbeats came to Ben Rourke's ears and he watched a rider pass swiftly by. It was too dark, and Rourke was too far away, to identify the rider positively, but he caught a momentary glimpse of the horse's blazed face and he knew the rider was rancher Oscar Brown.

Almost immediately, Rourke saw a man step from Wayburn's Undertaking Parlor and mount one of a pair of horses standing at its hitchrack. He spurred up, in close pursuit of Oscar Brown who was now rattling across the plank Phantom River bridge at the far end of town.

It was Rourke's turn now to take off. But after crossing the bridge, he did not hold to the back trail the other riders had taken. He knew, approximately, the route Oscar Brown planned to travel. With that in mind, he angled off sharply and swung wide. While the trail Brown was taking through the pines was a shortcut, nevertheless, at night—due to the slower, more careful going it demanded—it was the slower way to his ranch. Rourke gauged his own trail to meet Brown's at the point Brown would emerge from the pines.

Riding wide open, Ben Rourke reached the meeting point, but the rancher was as yet nowhere in sight. Rourke debated only a moment, and then he made his decision. He backtrailed into the pines.

A quarter mile into the woodland, he broke suddenly into a clearing. Two riders were in that clearing, one of them holding his hands high above his head. Rourke caught the glint of starlight on gun-metal as the second rider whirled toward him.

The gun blasted and a bullet fanned Rourke's cheek. Rourke's own gun was up and thundered twice in quick succession. The gunman weaved in the saddle and then was pitched headlong to the turf as his horse bolted.

ROURKE dismounted, running, and was at the fallen gunman's side. Rancher Oscar Brown's face was pale and drawn as he dismounted and joined the Agency man.

"Rourke," he said hoarsely, "you sure saved my bacon. This is the Phantom River Kid. He was after my six thousand dollars." His eyes grew wide, wondering. "But I thought you were in jail?"

"I was," Rourke said. "But I managed to pull a bar loose and squeeze out. Now we'll soon see who this ornery masked critter callin' himself the Phantom River Kid really is."

Rourke reached first for the man's pulse, and ascertained that he was dead and not trickily playing possum. He was in no particular hurry to pull loose the floursack mask that was tied with a drawstring about the bandit's neck, for he knew, almost to a certainty, that when he unmasked the man he would look upon the features of what had lately been—Phantom River's undertaker.

He pulled loose the drawstring and drew off the mask, and then his breath whistled from him.

Oscar Brown muttered, "Gabby! Him —the Phantom River Kid? I'd never have guessed it!"

"I didn't either," Ben Rourke admitted. "But I should have. He was a mite too anxious to pin the blame for bein' that ornery killer on me. Well, it looks like we got us a little load to pack back to town."

"We probably can put him on his own horse," Brown offered. "I think it headed in them trees there."

Ben Rourke was getting his rope from

his saddle when he heard the voice speak softly behind him.

"Just put your hands on top of your head and turn around slow-like."

Ben Rourke did as he was commanded, and was not at all surprised at whom he saw when he turned.

"You're a little late, aren't you, Wayburn?" he said to the undertaker whose face looked at him, grim and hard, from above a potent .45 Peacemaker. "I was expectin' you'd be with Gabby, yore pardner. In fact, when I downed Gabby, I half expected it was you."

"That's it, make yore brag," said Wayburn. "Or maybe you'd rather pray or cry a little. You got just about a minute to live."

Rourke shook his head. "It's no brag I'm makin', Wayburn. I'm tellin' you the truth. I had an idea you were the Phantom River Kid the moment I began wonderin' what person in town had the best chance of knowin' what ranchers had just made big stock sales, how much money they were totin', and what trail they were takin' with their dinero. Outside of me, you had the best chance, Wayburn, with only a wall separatin' yore establishment from mine. Then when I saw some white stuff on yore ear this afternoon, and rightly figured out what it was finally, I knowed it was you for sure. That stuff on yore ear was whitewash, Wayburn. An' it come from holdin' that ear mighty hard against the wall between our places, so that you could hear what was bein' said between me and my customers."

Wayburn's hand tightened on his gun. His eyes darted on either side of him suspiciously. "Why yuh tellin' me all this?"

"I told you all this, Wayburn, so you'd be busy hearin' me and not hear the gent who just came up behind you—and has a gun trained smack on yore spine right now."

"Drop yore gun, Wayburn," Oscar Brown commanded, having just emerged from the pines where he'd gone for the dead outlaw's horse.

Wayburn clipped a futile curse. He threw down his gun, turned, saw Brown and cursed again.

Ben Rourke smiled as he said, "Eavesdroppin' on others has paid off for you and yore pal for quite a while, Wayburn. But this was one time you listened too attentive-like. It gave Brown that chance to sneak up on you. Suppose we ride back to town now for a little talk with Sheriff Trump and his deputy, Small?"

And, shortly, when they were riding back, Ben Rourke felt happier than he had in some time. Perhaps it was because he guessed that the spirit of Hap Goode—if it were possible that he could know—was resting just a little easier, and smiling too.

COMING NEXT ISSUE!

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The Cowboy HAD A WORD for it!

By CHUCK STANLEY

THE trail herd was well along on its way to market by the time the young tenderfoot, who was losing a good deal of his "shine," got a chance to meet up with the old-timer again. There were a good many chores to be done around the ranch house with most of the cowboys and the cook away, and this meant that the "pilgrim" and his "maverick-er" friend had to do most of their chatting in the evening after they had thrown together a meal for themselves.

The old-timer stoked up his pipe, settled down in the creaky rocker that was his favorite roost, and watched while the "Arbuckle" caught his knees with his hands and sat down on the bottom step of the stairs leading up to the old "wrangler's" cabin.

Wagons and the Cowboy

"Lots of folks who go to these dude ranches and travel around in this Western country don't realize that there was any means of transport out this way besides the horse. They all figure that if you didn't know how to 'fork a bronc' you were plumb out of luck. But that ain't so. Wagons were an important part of the life of the cowboy, and he had his own colorful names for describing them."

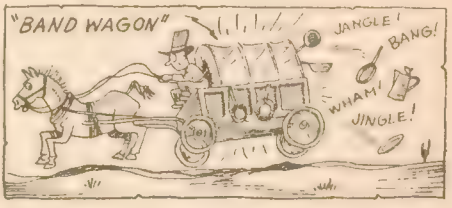
The young tenderfoot listened seriously, then began jotting down the information in his ever-ready notebook. The old-timer chuckled each time he saw the dog-eared book and dubbed it his "lingo tally."

"We've already talked about some of the wagons around a ranch, like the 'chuck-wagon' and the 'calf wagon' and things like that, but there were plenty others. Did you ever hear tell of a 'band-wagon?'"

"Not unless you mean the kind circus folks used to carry around the band or ride the calliope. And I don't reckon it's that," replied the "younker."

The older man chuckled happily, then explained that a "band wagon" was the description given by a cowboy to the range peddler's wagon which came around to the various ranches and prairie cattle camps to sell pots and pans, clothing, saddle sundries, and anything else the cowboy might happen to need.

"It was a good name, too," explained the leathery waddy, "because on a clear day when the wagon was moving along the trails, some of them bumpy and rutted, you could hear



the pots and pans jingling together, and the bits and spurs on their racks and nails sure made pleasant music. Almost as beautiful as the 'range music' made by the cookie when he smacked the old triangle for chow."

Bed-Wagons, Too!

A puff of smoke sent up a cloud before the face of the experienced ranny as he told about a number of episodes surrounding the range peddlers. Then he said:

"I recall once when I was on a trek with one of them big outfits from down in the Texas panhandle. That was one of the few times I ever actually saw a 'bed-wagon.'"

Our Tenderfoot Learns About Ranch Wagons!

"What's that?" inquired the newcomer, "something like a prairie pullman?"

"That ain't as funny as it sounds, son," declared the old-timer seriously. "Right after the railroads came through here in the Seventies and Eighties, there were some of those Irish track workers who liked to call them just that. The only difference between a 'prairie pullman' and a real one was that you didn't sleep in a 'prairie pullman'! You just stowed your 'bed-roll' in it. With the smaller outfits like this one here, like you know, the bed-rolls are stowed in the chuck-wagon between stops on the trail."

"Why didn't all of the outfits use the chuck-wagon for their bed-rolls?" inquired the "greenhorn."

"Well," the "mossback" replied, "these here 'bed-wagons' were something that the cavalry more or less introduced to the Frontier. When a troop of cavalry was out on a chase after a bunch of Injuns, they couldn't always tote their bed-rolls on the backs of their horses. It slowed them up too much. So they used a 'bed-wagon,' and if there happened to be any wounded after the battle or skirmish, then the 'bed-wagon' made a good ambulance. Taking a leaf from the soldiers, plenty of the big range bosses had their bed-wagons rigged up just like a rolling hospital. The waddies sure appreciated something like this when they were hurt on the range."

Bucking Buckboards

As the conversation went along regarding other types of wagons, the old-timer and his apt student decided to stroll down to the carriage shed and look over some of the equipment stored there. The "shorthorn" was familiar with the "buckboard," since he had come out to the ranch on the vehicle before horse-back riding was one of his assets. This "buckboard" was a light wagon

made of slats or thin boards. This flexible wagon bed was mounted on four wheels and ran from axle to axle. The seat, usually set on two wooden or elliptical spring supports, was mounted toward the front. Packages and other luggage were kept on the wagon by means of an iron railing which ran around the outer edge of the slats.

"Back in the old days, some of the boys used to like to hitch up those buckboards and ride them behind a spirited horse like them old Romans did," the old-timer explained. "One of them figured that with the wagon bed bouncing up and down it was just like being on board a 'bucking bronc,' so he figured it was all right to call it a 'buckboard' or 'bucking board,' and the name hooked on."

"Was there anything different about a 'buckboard driver' in those days?" inquired the "greener." "I've heard some of the boys talking about 'buckboard drivers' like they were a separate race from the regular 'ranny.'"

"Sure thing," declared the "moss-back." "In the old days, a 'buckboard driver' was a mail man. Most folks are familiar with the famous 'Pony Mail' or the 'Pony Express' where special delivery letters were carried for five dollars a half ounce from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Sacramento, California. But the greater portion of the mail routes in the Old West were carried by 'buckboard drivers' or on stage coaches. So the name came to designate all mail men."

A Modern Vehicle

The attention of the two men turned to another small wagon in the shed, and the old-timer shook his head slowly. He explained that this was a modern vehicle that no old campaigner had ever thought of.

"That's a 'cake wagon,'" he explained. "When cattle were first turned out on the range, and during the Civil War when most of the men were fighting, the longhorns just roamed and ate and no one minded much about them. Now that we have high-grade beef cattle and special breeds, we dish up special rations beside the good long grass on the range. Now the cows get cotton seed cakes to improve their diet and put more meat on their bones."

The discussion then turned to the calf wagon and the chip wagon, which had been the subject of discussion in earlier conversations between the old range rider and his young friend.

The Chihuahua Cart

"Did you ever hear of a 'Chihuahua cart'?" inquired the older man. The younker brightened up and replied:

"I sure did, one year when I was down

along the Mexican Border. It's one of those heavy wooden carts with solid wooden wheels like the Mexicans use to carry their strings of peppers, mesquite beans and chunks and other things."

The attention of the pair was next turned to a light, uncovered wagon with two seats. The old rannihan explained that it was known as a "democrat," and was used for quite a bit of the transportation work around the ranch. It was one of the few types of ranch wagons that had springs, and was particularly appealing to the women folk. Some cowboys had a habit of calling it the "lady's wagon" or the "heifer wagon."

"There's nothing unusual about that one," declared the mentor as he pointed to a heavy two-wheeled vehicle which contained heavy pliers, fence-cutters, stretching tools, and several bales of barbed wire. "That's what the boys call a 'fence wagon.'"

The "pilgrim" made a note of this, then inquired:

"What was the difference between a 'grass train' and a 'grain train' in the old West?"

The old-timer shook his head, then replied: "You're getting one jump ahead of me, son. I figured on talking about wagon trains and stagecoaches and things like that in one evening by itself when we could really cover the subject. But if you want to know the difference I'll tell you. Maybe it'll give you an appetite for some of the little known facts about those trains later on. A 'grass train' was a wagon train drawn by oxen. They were called that because the oxen could live on the grass that grew along the trail. Trains which used horses and mules for means of locomotion were known as 'grain trains' because these animals didn't have the muscles necessary to haul heavy loads and do heavy work unless they were fed on grain. Savvy?"

"Righto," laughed the "greener."

Groaning Carts

Delighted at the ability of his student, the old ranny went on to explain how a wagon that was overloaded was usually described by the cowboy as a "groaning cart," and the only time he didn't say this in a tone of derision was when the "groaning cart" happened to be a well-filled chuck wagon at the beginning of a long trail jaunt.

He explained, too, that a variation of the "groaning chuck wagon" was the name "growler" also given to this vehicle when its load caused the springs to "growl" or complain squeakily at the burden they were asked to carry.

Other types of wagon that went into the notes that the "younker" was jotting down were the "Hooligan wagon" and the "hoodlum wagon."

"The 'hooligan wagon' was an important piece of equipment for the cook, and for cowboys isolated in line cabins about the range," declared the "mavericker." "It was used to carry wood and water to the cook or to the range camps, so they would not lack for these important commodities. Frequently it was necessary to 'dry camp' where there was no water for cattle or men, and no fuel for heating or cooking. That was when the 'hooligan wagon' proved a real Godsend. The 'hoodlum wagon' was just another name for the 'bed-wagon' we were talking about a while back."

"Did the cowboys have many valuables along with them on these wagon trips?" asked the "Arbuckle" seriously. The old-timer scratched his head, then shook it slowly as he said:

"Most of the waddies were no hands at collecting valuables. If they got a little money ahead, they spent it for good Stetson hats, good boots, a nice saddle, or an outfit of 'store clothes' for going to town. Most of them who got hold of any sizeable amount of 'dinero' figured to start up their own spreads and put the money into cattle."

Jewelry Box

"That being the case," the tenderfoot said, "what did they mean by a 'jewelry box'?"

The old-timer took his pipe out of his mouth, held it firmly between two gnarled fingers then replied: "You've had your hunkers up over a 'jewelry box' plenty of times, Mister. That's the box on the front end of a chuck wagon where the 'wrangler' stores his hobbles for the horses, where the 'shooting rannies' keep their extra cartridges, and any fellow on a 'roundup' or 'trail drive' can keep small things he figures he may need in a big hurry. Looks like the 'hombre' who gave the box that name must have looked into the dresser drawer of one of them classy society

females! The same thing was also known as a 'jewelry chest.' "

Jotting down his findings carefully, the young range-hand next discovered that "mess-wagon" and "pie-box" were two others names that were frequently given to the chuck-wagon by the hopeful cowboy.

"What was a 'shotgun' wagon?" inquired the curious young waddy, pencil poised at one corner of his mouth as he was about to moisten the tip.

"Now, that was a plumb interesting vehicle," replied the old-timer. "Back in the wild and woolly days, like you know, some of the bigger ranchers didn't like the idea of having little 'shirt tail' outfits running cows around the edges of their range. They used to keep fellows away at roundup time, and this made it impossible for them to pick up their calves and mother cows. When something like this happened, three or four of these small outfits would get together and send out a 'roundup wagon' to tend to their own 'cutting and branding.' Expecting trouble, like they did, from the big outfits, all of these wagons were equipped with a supply of shotguns and shells. Therefore, even after the belligerent side of the picture had toned down a good deal, these independent 'roundup wagons' got to be known as 'shotgun wagons' and the name stuck like a prairie burr."

Pie Wagons

Two names that are quite different in their meaning nowadays had special meanings to the cowboy in the old days, and the "Arbuckle" was glad to add these to his lore of the cowboy. One of them was the name 'pie-wagon.' This was a small trailer similar to those we find carrying tents and camping

equipment behind the modern automobile. But the cowboy gave it this designation because he fondly hoped that the range cook was going to use this bit of equipment for toting home-made apple pies, or any of the other delicacies that the hard-working "ranny" craved. The range rider had no way of knowing that modern slang was going to hang the appellation "pie-wagon" on the police patrol wagons in large cities.

The second was the "trail wagon." Taking the name itself, the "pilgrim" was inclined to feel that this would be a wagon used in driving up the trail. The old-timer chuckled, however, as he explained that it was a corruption of the words "trailer wagon," and designated one wagon hitched behind another wagon when camp was being broken or moved. Frequently incidents on the trail which resulted in death or injury to horses, mules or oxen, made it necessary to hook up a wagon as a "trail wagon" until additional teams could be secured to pull it by itself.

The rookie ranchhand began to realize that there were quite a few important wheeled vehicles that contributed to the mode of life of the cowhand, and he commented on this. The mavericker chuckled and remarked:

"There might have been twenty or twenty-five different wagons in the life of a cowboy, but when he spoke of THE WAGON, he always meant just one particular wagon, and that was the 'chuck wagon.' He realized that he couldn't do much work, nor stand up against the buffeting of nature with a herd of several hundred cattle without a solid stomach lining of good, wholesome food. He gave some indication of the regard in which he held the 'roundup wagon' or 'chuck wagon,' when he frequently referred to it as 'the layout,' 'the works' or 'the spread.' "

Howdy, Pard!

Something of the bond that was forged between trail riders and trail drivers in this respect can be understood when we realize that the most common greeting on a Western route was: "Howdy, pard, which way's the wagon?" To friend and stranger alike, this meant a spot where warm hospitality could be expected and a wealth of range information could be exchanged.

The "shorthorn" shook his head in understanding, and the old-timer concluded:

"We've sure learned a heap about ranch wagons this time, but next time we get together we're going to talk about some of them big cross-country wagons. I reckon you're going to find it plumb interesting."

The "greener" felt sure that he would, and we hope you folks will find it interesting, too.

●

THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT Appears in Every Issue!

Ed Cass charged the kneeling man

BUZZARDS HATE BULLETS

By PAUL S. POWERS

A mule spoiled Tom Thompson's face for him but that was nothing compared to what Garrity's gunnies threatened!

TOM THOMPSON had made up his mind. The first Circle X ranny who who made a crack about his flattened nose would get a punch on the jaw—and hard. Tom's temper, plus his touchiness about his deformed face, had cost him a dozen jobs in the past few years. Maybe it would lose him this one and his first day on this spread would be his last. Well, if so, there would be other jobs.

He wasn't yet acquainted with his fellow punchers. It had been inky dark during his ride with them from Jackpine. Of course, he'd seen Garrity, the foreman who had hired him, but it was hard to tell much about an hombre when you saw him only in the smoky light of a saloon.

The Circle X was driving a lot of cattle to the railroad for shipment, Garrity had explained. They had moved three hundred head that day, he said, and

there would be a thousand more to round up for market during the next few weeks The ranch was short-handed, and did Thompson want a riding job? Tom Thompson had said he did. And now in the dawn he had awakened in a strange bunkhouse.

Men were already moving about, and from the cookshack which adjoined the sleeping quarters came the welcome aroma of coffee and frying meat. Tom pulled on his boots, and automatically reached for his coiled cartridge belt and holstered gun. Buckling his armament about his slim waist, he went out to the washbench to slosh his face and hands.

ABE GARRITY was standing by the doorway, smoking a cigarette, his heavy shoulders hunched. He watched the new ranny with bleak, almost colorless eyes.

"We take it pretty easy here, Thompson," he growled, while the new man was gingerly making use of the soiled and ragged towel. "But I've a few rules—iron-clad ones. One of 'em is—you're to stay clear away from there." He jerked his thumb toward the Circle X ranchhouse, a rambling, white-painted structure which stood in a grove of cottonwoods some two hundred yards away.

"Old Sheldon, the owner, had a stroke sometime back," he went on. "He's sick, and he don't want anybody around. His daughter takes care of him. You're not to talk to her, either. Them's my orders."

"Why not?" Tom was curious. "What if she speaks to me?"

"She ain't likely to," Garrity sneered. His mouth tightened under his tawny, close-clipped mustache. "If she does, be polite and that's all. Tell her nothin' about the ranch work. You savvy? The less women folks know about business, the less they'll be in the way. Well, let's eat. We've plenty ridin' to do."

The beating of a spoon on a dishpan was calling them in to breakfast. A squat, bushy-browed cowhand with skin as dark as an Indian's was taking his turn as cook, and his uncleanly appearance instantly took the edge from Tom's appetite. Two of the men were already eating, wolfing their food from tin plates. The foreman introduced them as Ace Tanner and Ed Cass.

The new puncher was about to sit down when the other member of the Circle X outfit came lumbering in. He was a big man in his early twenties, and his face was round and pink. In spite of his youth, his fine, blond hair was thinning to baldness.

"Buenos dias," he greeted the latest addition to the payroll. "I didn't catch yore name last night, feller. Mine is Moony Wiggins."

"I'm Tom Thompson," Tom said, extending his hand.

"Funny name, Tom Thompson. Sounds like you was beatin' a drum." Wiggins smiled. "What happened to yore face? Did a horse kick—"

Quick as a mountain cat, Tom chopped a terrific left hook to the side of Moony Wiggins' chin, and with a booming jar the big ranny hit the cookshack floor with his back and shoulders.

"Yeah," Tom said evenly. "When I was eleven years old I *was* kicked. Only it was a mule, not a horse. Is there anything else yuh want to know?"

"Not—not a thing!" spluttered Wiggins, lurching to his feet and rubbing his jaw. "Whatever it was, it couldn't have slammed yuh much harder than you done me!" He managed to grin, a little crookedly. "What was yuh tryin' to do, Thompson—make my face as flat as yours?"

Garrity and the others had been as amazed as Wiggins at the sudden ferocity of young Thompson's attack. But now they laughed uproariously, the foreman's guffaw as loud as the rest. It was plain to Tom that if he was to be fired from this spread it wouldn't be for fighting. He was sorry he'd lost his temper, especially as Wiggins shook hands with him before sitting down to breakfast.

"I had it comin' to me, kid," the big puncher said. "But, whew! You do hit hard!"

IN A few days Moony Wiggins had become Tom's close friend—his only friend, in fact, among the Circle X men. Ed Cass and Ace Tanner didn't take to the newcomer, nor he to them. They were of a type with which he had become familiar during his restless travels through the Southwest—the range bully kind. Gunmen rather than cowhands, they bungled their work whenever they were unable to shirk it.

Blackie Barker, the cook and handyman, was a bird of the same feather, furtive and vindictive. He rode with the others, was a fair hand, but Tom dis-

liked him from the first day, when he had seen Blackie abusing a horse. Foreman Abe Garrity was a puzzle. He was a competent cattleman, but Tom thought there was something strange in his actions and in the orders he gave.

The days, from dawn to dusk, were put in at rounding up cattle, combing miles of valley and foothill country for anything bearing the Circle X brand and heading them into a fenced basin halfway to Jackpine.

Later, the stock would be driven to town for shipment, Tom was told. It seemed odd that the ranch was to be cleared of all its cattle, from calves on up to heavy beef, but perhaps the owner had planned to retire because of his illness.

It was the kind of work that kept the riders separated most of the time, but, whenever he could, Tom Thompson rode with Moony Wiggins. On one occasion, however, Tom was on his own all morning, having been detailed to scour the brush country north of headquarters.

He had worked his way back until, toward noon, he found himself in a canyon a quarter of a mile from the Circle X ranchhouse. Crossing the dry creek bed, he made a sharp turn and found himself almost face to face with Wiggins.

The big puncher wasn't alone. Drawn up beside Moony's long-legged bay was a pinto pony with a girl in the saddle.

"Howdy," Tom said, lifting his Stetson and then pulling the brim farther down over his eyes. "Didn't mean to intrude."

He wanted to ride on past. He was not at ease with the gentler sex for he imagined himself as one of the ugliest of men, one who repelled women. When he was with a girl he forgot his fine, dark eyes, his wavy hair and clear, tanned skin, and remembered only his hideously flattened nose. This was Old Sheldon's daughter, of course. Well, Garrity needn't have warned him not to hold any palaver with her. He wanted nothing to do with the girl.

"Wait a minute, Tom," Moony Wiggins said. "Miss Sheldon wants to meet you."

Tom Thompson pulled up his roan bronc, taking his first square look at the

[*Turn page*]

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girl. Not more than nineteen, he thought. Her hair glinted like copper in the sunshine, and her eyes were as blue as the New Mexican skies.

"So you're the new cowboy that Mr. Garrity hired?"

"Yes, ma'am." Tom wondered why Moony had violated the foreman's rule not to hold conversation with the ranchman's daughter, and glancing at his friend he guessed the answer. On Moony's round, ingenuous face was a look of doglike worship and devotion.

"I hadn't seen you before, Mr. Thompson," the girl was saying. "Because of dad's health I can't ride out very often, and then only for an hour or so."

Moony Wiggins was making frantic motions to the new waddy, gestures that Tom didn't understand.

"Tell her," Moony whispered hoarsely. Then he saw the surprised look on his friend's face, and raised his voice. "Tell Miss Sheldon what's goin' on here," he insisted. "Tell her how the cows are bein' cleaned off this spread."

TOM THOMPSON could only blink his bewilderment at this outburst. The girl was looking at him, and he saw her expression change from one of friendliness to a stare of contempt.

"If you're trying to insinuate again, Wiggins," she flashed at Moony, "that Mr. Garrity is cheating my father, or doing anything dishonest—"

"But I *am*," Moony said simply. "You've got to listen—"

She waited for no more, but slapped her pinto into a run, and in half a minute she was out of sight around a bend in the canyon. Moony Wiggins watched her go, and he was cursing softly.

"What did yuh want me to say to her, amigo?" Tom demanded.

"Well, you savvy what's goin' on here, don't yuh? I've tried to explain things to her before, but she trusts the wrong people. If you'd been faster to back me up—"

"But I don't know anything, Moony," Tom protested. "I kind of thought that somethin' crooked was afoot, but I didn't know what."

"Dang it, man, I thought you was smart, but seems yuh ain't got the sense of a gopher!" Moony Wiggins groaned. "Since the old man's been laid up he's been robbed right and left by Garrity, and now Garrity is plannin' to make a clean sweep. You see, the foreman fired the honest men off this spread and hired hombres who'd help him with his dirty business.

"He signed you on because we're about ready for the big drive now, and Garrity wants it to go through quick and without a hitch. Me—well, I admit my hands ain't clean. I was willin' enough, at first, to say yes to Garrity's promises of easy dinero. I still don't care a white chip for the old man. But what I feel about—about Alice is different, Tom. I want to save the ranch for her. Understand?"

Tom saw the misery in the big cowhand's eyes, and he nodded.

"I think I do. But how can Garrity get by with this steal?"

"He's got John Sheldon's written power-of-attorney. I think the old man's stroke must have affected his mind. He don't even know—and Alice don't—that Garrity sold a bunch of cattle the day you was hired at Jackpine. He'll believe you, mebbe. You've got to get to him, pronto, and tell him how the cards are bein' played."

Tom shook his head decisively.

"Nope. I'm leavin' this outfit, pullin' my stakes, Moony. Here and now. I don't want to be on either end of a crooked deal like this one."

"If you won't do it for the Sheldons," Wiggins pleaded, "won't yuh do it for me?" Then, seeing the obstinate refusal in Tom's eyes, he changed his tactics. "It's as much as our lives is worth to be even *talkin'* about this. I don't blame yuh for bein' scared, because Garrity and the others would kill you in a minute if they caught yuh at the ranchhouse. So if yuh're afraid—"

Tom Thompson saw through Moony's artifice, and he grinned. At the same time, anger against the Garrity crew rose within him like a flame. He had been used as a tool, been made a fool of. Deliberately he rolled and lighted a brown cigarette. Moony watched him with eager expectancy.

"You'll try?"

"All right, compadre," Tom decided, his jaw hardening. "I'll slip up to the house this afternoon and give old Sheldon the low-down."

Moony Wiggins heaved a sigh of relief. But his round, perspiring face was still anxious.

"You'll be takin' an awful chance. If the boys catch yuh there you'd better start shootin' before they do. But I think they're over at Three-Mile corral. I'll ride over and figger a way to keep 'em there for awhile. Good luck, Tom—and thanks!"

ALL seemed clear, but Tom Thompson was cautious. He watched the house from the top of a rise for ten minutes, then left his roan in a thicket of cedars and advanced on foot. He'd do as he had promised, and then, if these people refused to hear the truth, he would hightail it for happier stamping grounds.

Alice Sheldon answered his hurried knock at the side door. She seemed surprised, but not unfriendly. He noticed that she had changed from riding togs into something fluffy and feminine.

"Yes, I suppose you can see dad," she said, in answer to his rather brusque request. "But he's very sick, and you mustn't tire him. Did Mr. Garrity send you?"

"No, he didn't," Tom said, stepping quickly inside. "But what I have to say to yore father is mighty important to him—and to you."

She hesitated, eyed him doubtfully, and finally led the way into an adjoining bedroom.

"I'll go," she said, moving aside to let him pass in the doorway, "if you want to talk to him in private."

"I'd rather you'd stay. In fact, Miss," he said sharply, "I insist."

"You insist?" she repeated, flushing. "I'm not used to being spoken to in that way, Mr. Thompson."

Tom couldn't help smiling.

"Mr. Thompson," he drawled, "insists on insistin'."

He turned toward the bed where a giant, gray-haired man was propped up on pillows. Sheldon was mountainously fat, even after a siege of sickness, and his face was a dusky shade of red. Apoplexy had paralyzed one side of his mouth, so that his words came thickly and with difficulty.

"Who in blazes are you, and what do yuh want?" he demanded of his visitor, spearing him with petulant blue eyes. "Why did you let this stranger in, Alice?" he complained.

[*Turn page*]

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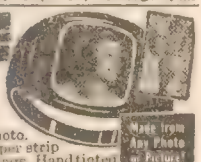

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"I work for you, Mr. Sheldon. Or rather, I thought I did, but it seems I'm ridin' strictly for Garrity," Tom said frankly. "He's cleaning you out, sir. Did yuh know that? Hold on, let me speak! Last Tuesday, the day I was signed on, yore foreman sold a big bunch of yore steers down in Jackpine. Did you know about it?"

The huge ranchman looked blank.

"Well—no. He hasn't reported it to me as yet, but I have every confidence—dang it, man, what are yuh drivin' at?" he raged, his anger mounting.

The girl had whitened. "Mr. Thompson, you'd better go. Wiggins put you up to this! Didn't he?"

"In a way, yes," Tom admitted. "But he's right. Nearly every cow you own, Sheldon, is in the Basin ready to be driven down to the railroad for shipment. We've been roundin' 'em up all week."

"Garrity has been my foreman for years. If he's found it necessary to sell stock, I'm backin' him to the limit!" fumed John Sheldon. "As for you, hombre, you're a trouble maker, and I'll see that Garrity gives you yore time."

Tom smiled thinly as he turned to leave, knowing that the Circle X foreman would give him more than his week's pay when he learned what had just taken place. He intended to be miles away, and making dust, when that happened. It was plain enough that he could do nothing more to help the Sheldons. The old man's mind had probably been weakened by his stroke. Well, he'd kept his word to Moony. Did the best he could.

ON HIS way through the other room Tom took quick glances from the windows on both sides. The girl noticed his actions, and she stopped him at the door just as he laid his hand on the knob.

"You're afraid, Mr. Thompson?"

He reddened under his tan.

"I've told the truth so far, and I'll keep tellin' it. Yes, I'm scared some. What chance would I have against Garity's buzzards?"

Something in his look must have carried conviction for the first time to Alice Sheldon. Her big eyes grew larger, and she reached out to touch Tom's arm.

"Don't leave," she whispered. "Stay on the ranch. If anything's wrong here,

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it will be good to know that we have two friends sticking by us—you and Wiggins."

His defiance faded then, and he found himself saying something quite different than he'd intended. He couldn't resist that appealing look—he didn't want to!

"Whatever happens," he promised, "I'll—I'll see it through."

Nobody was in sight when Thompson strode from the house. His roan bronc was where he had left it, and he mounted, riding west and then south. It was already late, and as he and Moony were supposed to be working on their own, he decided not to go to Three-Mile corral.

He remembered Garrity's orders for the day. They were to meet at the cookshack for supper at sundown, then hit their saddles again for more work by moonlight. Circling slowly back, he waited until he saw Blackie Barker coming in to cook the biscuits. He followed leisurely, knowing that the others would be along soon.

Leaving his horse at the feed-rack, he went into the combined bunkhouse and

[*Turn page*]

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galley where Barker was already busy.

"Didn't see you all day. Didn't yuh drive down any stuff?" Barker grunted, and Tom was relieved to learn, from his manner, that he hadn't been suspected of double dealing.

"Nope. All those canyons up that way are as clean as a whistle, except for a few Rafter 46 strays," Tom said, going out to the bench to wash up.

He was lathering his face and hands when he saw Abe Garrity riding up from the east, and a minute later Ed Cass, Ace Tanner, and Moony Wiggins loomed up on the trail that led to the Basin. Tom finished his ablutions and reached for the towel. At that instant he felt something hard and cold pressed against the small of his back.

"Don't move, Thompson," came Garrity's harsh voice.

Tom's heart bounded, skipped a beat, then resumed its normal thumping.

"What's the matter?" he asked quietly.

"You savvy well enough. Get into the bunkhouse," the foreman snarled. "Blackie! Take this skunk's gun. Then get some rope."

The cowpuncher-cook was obeying orders, tieing Tom's hands, when Ed Cass and Ace Tanner came in, closely followed by Moony Wiggins.

"What's up, boss?" Tanner yelped. Tom, who was disarmed and helpless now, flashed a look at Moony's face. It was stiff with horror.

"I'll tell you what's up," the foreman stormed. "A couple hours ago I saw this flat-nosed polecat sneakin' into the Sheldon house. He was in there long enough to have blabbed everything. Anything to say to *me*, Thompson?" Garrity barked. "Don't deny it, do yuh?"

When Tom scorned to reply, Garrity sent his fist crashing into his face. His hands tied behind his back, Tom had no defense and the punch knocked him down.

THE gang then went into a huddle as to what to do with him. Tom Thompson, sitting up groggily, heard their arguments but was too dazed for a while to pay much attention. The men talked for a long time. Day dimmed and the lamp was lighted. Ed Cass and Barker began eating, but the others were too excited.

It was agreed that Thompson would

have to be "quieted for keeps because he knowed too much." And the gang would have to work fast, for there was no telling how much the Sheldons knew or what they would do.

"The old man's helpless, of course, but the gal might try to git to town," Tanner said. "Mebbe we ought to make sure of her."

"Won't be necessary, if we get busy," Abe Garrity decided. "Her father's too sick for her to leave, I reckon. It's possible that they didn't believe what Thompson told. If they had, wouldn't old John have sent Thompson to see the law in Jackpine? I think I've still got the Injun sign on the old fool.

"But to make sure we cash in, I'll ride to town this evenin' and get in touch with a buyer for the whole layout. Sure I can sell the ranch right out from under the Sheldons, thanks to my power-of-attorney. It'll be a bright night—you rannies can start the cows movin' down to the railhead. Yuh can meet me in Jackpine tomorrow. Then a quick getaway for all of us after we whack up the proceeds."

Ed Cass jerked a thumb toward Tom Thompson, who had perched himself on the edge of a bunk.

"Where shall we do it?"

"In some out-of-the-way spot on yore way to the Basin," Garrity decreed, his pale eyes glistening murderously in the lamplight. "Cave a bank on what's left, or cover him with brush. He won't be found maybe for years. Well, I'm hittin' for town."

"Leave it to us, boss," Ace Tanner grinned. "We'll fix the kid's clock. I hated the whelp at first sight. When we're through, that face of his will look funnier than ever!"

The first inkling Tom had that his pard, Moony Wiggins, was working to save him, came a few minutes after the foreman had left for Jackpine. The Colt six-gun that Blackie Barker had taken from him was now missing from the corner where it had been tossed. Presently Moony came up to Tom and began abusing him.

"Time I was gettin' even for what yuh done to me that first mornin' you was here, Thompson!" he bellowed, plumping his big fist into the prisoner's midriff. He pulled his punch a little, but

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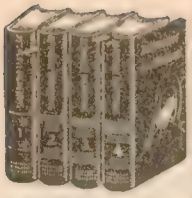

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it was realistic enough, and Tom doubled up. Moony twisted him roughly around, and pretended to be tightening the piece of lariat that bound Tom's hands together.

"I've planted yore gun on yore bronc—saddle pocket," he breathed in Tom's ear. "Try and get loose later. When yuh do, yell out to me." He had loosened Tom's knots as much as he had dared.

"Slug him again, Moony," Cass said, with a guffaw. "I'd been thinkin' here lately that you and him had got friendly."

"Come on," grunted Blackie Barker. "Let's get started. Sooner we get this over, the better."

Outside, and closely guarded by Barker's drawn six-shooter, Tom felt his rising hopes tumble again. Cass and Tanner insisted that he be put on another horse rather than his own.

"That roan of his is pretty fond of the kid, and we wouldn't want the horse to be hangin' around the place where we do the job. Wouldn't do, at all," Tanner expressed it. "I've slapped an old saddle on the sorrel yonder. We'll take him on that."

MOONY protested loudly, but Barker sided with the others, and they won the argument. There was nothing Moony could do. He wasn't much of a gunman, as Tom knew, and any of the three could probably have dropped him before he could get going.

They were suspicious of Moony now because of his proposal that Tom be allowed to ride his own horse. The moonlight was too bright for further trickery. The captive was put on the sorrel, and his own cayuse—with the precious .45 in the saddle-pocket—was left at the feed-rack as the grim little party moved southward down the trail.

Tom Thompson cast a last look back, and he saw the lights of the Sheldon house glimmering in the cottonwoods. Well, he and Moony had played the best they could, and lost. It was strange, but, desperate as the moment was, Tom was haunted by the vision of Alice's pleading eyes as he had last seen them. They would be with him to the end.

The group kept to the trail for a couple of miles, then veered to the left at a word from Ed Cass. Barker was riding on

one side of the prisoner and Tanner hung close to the other. Moony tried several times to drop a little behind the party, but Cass seemed to be watching him.

They were working closer to the river, and Tom knew that they might stop and start blasting at any moment. It was a good spot for murder, for in that wilderness of stone and stunted cedar the evidence of the crime might never be discovered. To try and free his hands seemed useless now, but Tom was pulling and tugging instinctively at his bonds. Somehow, it would be better to die with his hands free.

Ed Cass pulled up so suddenly that his rearing bronc slithered on its hind legs. "All right, boys, this is it!" he announced.

In that supreme instant Tom Thompson tore the flesh of his wrists, heedless of the pain that loosened his hands. He could see that Moony intended to make a fight of it, and he yelled at his friend with what might prove to be his last effort:

"Don't try it, pard! High-tail it!"

His shout was drowned in the roar of big caliber guns as Tom threw himself sideways from the back of the sorrel. Moony Wiggins had fired straight into Barker's body, and the cowhand-cook struck the ground only a yard from Tom, who was feeling the hot gusts of bullets ripping the sand all around him.

Moony's unexpected move had saved him, thus far, but he kept rolling. The night seemed filled with winking spangles of red flame.

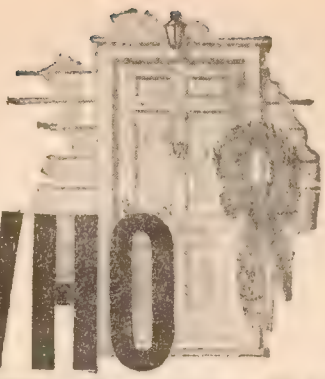
"You dirty buzzards!" Moony was bellowing, and then Tom had a glimpse of his pard's big body toppling from his saddle.

By this time Tom had located the six-shooter that Blackie Barker had dropped. It was half covered with sand, but his fingers closed upon it, flipped it up and turned it into a fire-belching engine of destruction.

Ed Cass was charging the kneeling man, shouting profanely, but Tom's first bullet ripped through his throat and he went tumbling, his horse barely missing Tom as it careened on by.

Ace Tanner was an even better target. Thompson triggered twice at the dark

[*Turn page*]



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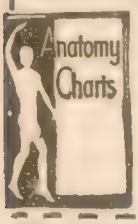

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hulk, and saw it twist convulsively. A final burst of flame came from it, a bullet droned wildly across the flats, and it was over. Tanner sprawled across a boulder where his horse had tossed him. He coughed, and was still.

Tom Thompson dropped on his knees beside his friend. He picked up one of the huge, limp hands and held it.

"Pard!" he panted. "How bad—is it?" Wiggins lay motionless, his eyes open and glazed, his face white and sweat-drenched in the moonlight. But he smiled, almost happily.

"I got it—good. But never mind, Tom—we won," he whispered. "Gave those buzzards—good. Now you got to head off Abe's dirty work. For Alice's sake. Yuh know, Tom," he said, smiling as he drew his last breath, "I must've been—a little in love with that girl."

IT WAS nearly one o'clock in the morning when Thompson pushed through the swingdoors of the Nugget, the third Jackpine saloon he had visited in search of his man. He'd had no wish to take the law into his own hands but his efforts to locate the sheriff had been unavailing, although he had called at both his house and his office.

Garrity was in the Nugget. The place was fairly well crowded with drinkers and cardplayers, but Tom's searching eyes spotted the Circle X foreman before the batwing doors had stopped wagging. Abe was sitting at one of the round, green-topped tables near the wall, his face turned so that Tom saw only his hard profile.

Across from him was a thick-set man of middle age who was wearing, except for a ten-gallon hat, townsmen's clothes. He seemed much interested in what Abe was telling him, and there were papers spread out between them.

Neither man looked up until Thompson, stepping as lightly as a cougar, was standing directly above them. And then Garrity flecked the ashes from the cigar he was smoking, and glanced up.

"Hello, Abe," Tom drawled. He grinned coldly as he saw the color ebb from the foreman's face, saw the poisonous eyes dilate with surprise and fear.

"Thompson! You—!" Garrity started slowly from his seat, then suddenly his gunhand darted toward leather. But

Tom's gun was a shade the quicker. It lashed out with flame and smoke, and a terrific concussion swayed the saloon lamps. Garrity's weapon was clipped from his fingers just as it left the holster.

Nearly everyone in the Nugget had scampered for cover, but Abe's companion at the table seized Tom's right arm.

"Hold on, you loco kid! I'm the sheriff! Don't—"

Tom spun half around and smashed the man in the chin with a short, jarring left. He went down, and Tom turned on Abe again, just in time to see an uplifted chair being swung down on him with terrific force.

There was no time to sidestep or duck the impact, but he fired at Abe's chest just an instant before the chair hit him. He heard it and felt it as it crashed to splinters on his head and face. Colored lights twinkled through his brain, and then all became darkness and silence.

THERE were moments of consciousness for Tom Thompson, but they were dreamlike and confused, and when he finally awoke with a clear but aching head it was afternoon, and he was in what appeared to be a hotel room. His skull and face were swathed in plasters and bandages.

One eye was covered, but with the other he observed a heavy, gray-haired hombre who was standing at the foot of the bed. The sheriff's badge he was wearing brought back the events of the night before, and Tom raised himself on his pillow. He had the impression that someone else was in the room, but it hurt his neck too much to turn and see.

"Well, Sheriff, am I under arrest?" he demanded.

"You killed Abraham Garrity," the officer said solemnly. Then his square face broke into a crinkled grin. "It was partly my fault, I reckon, for tryin' to interfere. You ain't arrested, exactly. You'll have to appear at the inquest, but only as a formality.

"Did yuh know I was about to make a five-thousand-dollar first payment on Sheldon's ranch when you came in and broke it up? Yuh saved me that dinero, and a big lawsuit, son. By the way, there's somebody here who wants to see you."

[*Turn page*]

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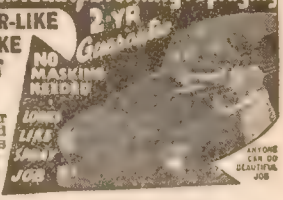

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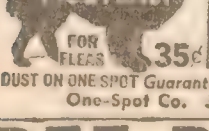

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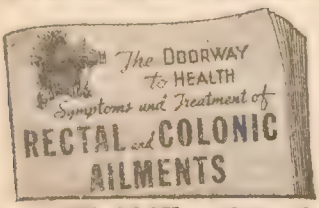

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This time Thompson craned his neck—and found it worth the pain it caused him. Alice Sheldon was there. The sheriff gallantly brought a chair for her, placing it beside the bed.

"Are you feeling better now—Tom?" she asked, shyly and anxiously.

"Fine," he said, pondering the fact that she had called him by his first name, and deciding that he wasn't delirious. "I thought you couldn't leave your father, so I wasn't expectin'—"

The girl's eyes filled with tears.

"He died last night, Tom. So I rode to town and got here early this morning. I told the sheriff all you told me. Wiggins was right, after all, wasn't he? Where is he now?"

Falteringly, he told her. The sheriff, too, listened to the grim details, and presently he excused himself, saying that he would take a posse to the scene of the tragedy and bring back the bodies. Tom and Alice were left alone then. They had little to say to one another, but discovered that words were unnecessary sometimes to reach perfect understanding. When the doctor came into the room they were holding hands.

"How's my patient?" beamed the medico, after clearing his throat in warning. He was a brisk young man of a type not often seen in cowtowns. "Better, eh? You had a bad concussion, but you'll be all right now. And I'll tell you what I'll do, while I'm repairing that head and face for you tomorrow. While I'm at it, I'll fix that flattened nose. Medical science knows more than it used to about remedying such disfigurements, and when I'm through with it—"

"You ain't goin' to do a thing to my nose, Doc," interrupted Tom Thompson. "Not a thing—I've just found out that Alice likes it the way it is. I like what she likes. And if I find an hombre that *don't* like it, Doc, I'll fix him so yuh can operate on his!"

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from Page 8)

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All told there are some 170,000 acres of irrigable land contained in the U. S. Bureau of Reclamation's Klamath project. Moreover normal water supply, held in lakes and reservoirs for irrigation use is apparently so much in excess of the actual amount required that there is virtually no likelihood of any water shortage developing.

As to climate, maximum summer temperatures may top the 100 mark, but summers are in the main comparatively cool. Frosts may occur as late as June and as early as September, but winter temperatures are on the average mild with the thermometer seldom dropping below 25.

The Klamath Basin itself is located in the southern part of west-central Oregon about 100 miles inland from the Pacific coast. It lies along the eastern slope of the Cascades and extends down into northern California, taking in parts of Modoc and Siskiyou counties in the latter state. West of the Basin, about 60 miles as the crow flies, lies the famous southwestern Oregon gold mining country that centers around Grant's Pass.

[Turn page]

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Good main roads and connecting highways join the region to the Pacific coast and the rest of Oregon as well as leading south into California.

The entire basin contains an estimated 300,000 acres of irrigable land, and the principal crop from the acreage standpoint is—alfalfa. Large acreages are also devoted to pastures, potatoes, barley and oats.

Livestock feeding is one of the main agricultural enterprises. So are sheep raising and milk production. At the same time, irrigation in the Basin affords many opportunities for the future development of more diversified farming. Such farming has already been successfully started in many instances.

For example a list of Basin agricultural products would have to include besides the crops and livestock already mentioned such a wide variety of things as hogs, wheat, turkeys, fur and game farms, horses, truck crops, honey, flaxseed, Kentucky bluegrass seed and many other grass seeds as well as corn and cut flowers.

A scatterment like that gives the individual farmer or settler in the section a chance to grow as cash crops pretty near whatever he understands best and feels will bring him in the best returns. Onions, for instance, one of the staple truck crops, customarily bring high cash returns per acre to Klamath Basin onion growers.

The general center and largest city in the Basin is Klamath Falls, with a population of approximately 25,000. Smaller towns on the Oregon side are Merrill, Malin and Bonanza. Tule Lake, California, is just over the state line.

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The Bureau of Reclamation's Klamath project (totaling as previously mentioned 170,000 irrigable acres) is divided into several separate districts or divisions. These and the irrigable acres in the specific districts are as follows:

Main Division, 41,000 acres; Tule Lake Division, 33,000 acres; Modoc Division, 30,000 acres. There are also nearly 17,000 acres in several smaller districts plus 8,000 acres in the Horsefly Irrigation district, 14,400 acres in the Langell Valley district, and 27,000 acres in the Lower Klamath Lake Drainage district.

That's a lot of land being or eventually to be opened up—new farmland in the colorful Pacific Northwest. And it takes into account just one major reclamation project.

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—CAPTAIN RANGER

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

RECKON all of you have long since met up with those two rollicking range detectives, Tombstone and Speedy. If you have, you'll start chuckling before you begin reading their next adventure, knowing you're in for an entertaining time. If you haven't—well, you're about to meet two most amusin' gents—and at the same time a pair that always land on their feet like cats, no matter how you throw 'em.

That's Tombstone and Speedy and not in a long and adventurous career have these two cow country sleuths bobbled and wisecracked their way through a more absorbing experience than in STRANGERS IN EL SEGUNDO, next issue's featured novel. If you want a guarantee of that, we'll just set down the remark that it was written by W. C. Tuttle, whose salty western gents are known to every reader of rangeland fiction.

Tombstone and Speedy were in a place called El Segundo and they had just had word from their boss, the association secretary, that they were fired. That didn't set so good. Go back to forty and found? Terrible! Something had to be done.

Something was. Somehow, things usually started to begin to happen right in the neighborhood of these two waddies, before ever they could hardly get their pants parked on a corral fence and set a spell. In this case they had time enough to be stared at,

[*Turn page*]

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blank-eyed, by the bank cashier when they reported to him that they were the range detectives he had ordered. Hmmm! Funny, that!

But then—just as they were tradin' big stories with the sheriff and his deputy—WHAM! There's a shot in the street, and a dead man. And the dead man is Jim Melton, ranch owner and banker. So the cashier didn't want range detectives, huh? But maybe Melton did. He'd never tell now, though.

Looked like a nice young feller named Johnny Landon might've fired that slug, because Johnny had been sparkin' around Melton's pretty daughter, Nita, and he was sure in town when the shooting happened. But Tombstone and Speedy had a sort of habit of digging under the surface, not taking just what showed on top, so they began sticking their long noses here and there—into other folks' affairs—folks, too, that was not only willing, but perhaps plumb able, to shoot off those noses right close to their whiskers.

Somebody didn't want those two gangling lawbirds prying around, that was sure, because directly things began to happen to tall Tombstone and his runty partner. Painful things. The boys were really playing rough. So then—

But you don't need to be told that Tombstone and Speedy wouldn't take that lying down. They didn't. But what they did and how they did it is for you to read in Tuttle's rousing yarn in the next issue!

Also in this issue, you'll find a mighty exciting novelet—POWDER ON THE PECOS, by Hal White. It's a humdinger packed with action!

But that isn't all, readers. It's far from all. Comin' up, we have MAN-BAIT FOR A GUN TRAP. Sound good? It's even better than it sounds, this rousing novelet by T. W. Ford.

Other stories, too, of course, all of them with the quality you have come to expect in EXCITING WESTERN. Plus the departments. Altogether, a lot of rich reading entertainment is yours in the next issue!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

LOTS of people write us about the stories in the magazine, and, if you aren't one of them, what are you waiting for? You know the address of the E. W. home ranch, the mails are running and there are plenty of writing materials. Among those who have

taken pen in hand—or pencil or typewriter—are the following for your perusal:

I have just finished W. C. Tuttle's "Corral City Showdown" and I think Tombstone and Speedy are sure swell. I almost missed my supper reading about them. I enjoy all stories in EXCITING WESTERN but I think Tombstone and Speedy are best. Keep them coming.—*Allen C. Hunter, Oklahoma City, Okla.*

I have noticed some people writing to you go all out for the long stories in EXCITING WESTERN, but me, I guess I'm different. I like the short yarns—funny, isn't it? But I can meet a lot of characters and ride along with them in a lot of different adventures in the same length of time as reading one long story.—*Emmett R. Cochran, Butte, Montana.*

Being just thirteen years old, maybe I shouldn't be sounding off about the west and such—but I want to tell you I like how your heroes do things in EXCITING WESTERN. I read every issue I can get, and the only thing that burns me is when something happens or somebody does something that isn't true to the west. I mean the west I know, and I guess Texas is plenty west, isn't it? But I must say that generally there is nothing I can quarrel about, and this book sure stacks up with the best of them when it comes to being true to life.—*John Redding, San Antonio, Texas.*

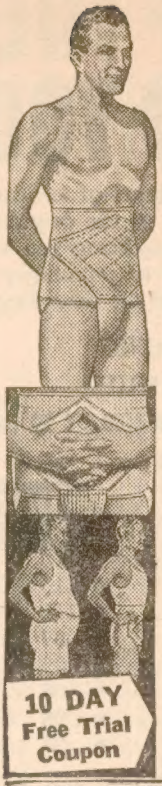
Sure I like the stories in your mag—most all of them, with only now and then a real lemon—but would you believe it, one of the first things I turn to when I get a new issue is Trail Blazers. Some of us—and I'm sorry to say I am one of 'em—have never been west of the Mississippi. The nearest we ever get to the "wide-open spaces" is Van Cortlandt Park—which is mighty fine but you don't smell much sage there. But, brother, Trail Blazers—and your stories, too, of course—have made enough of a real westerner out of me so I can trade the lingo and the facts with the best of them. I guess everyone needs variety in his life, and I get a lot of mine by reading EXCITING WESTERN.—*Rush Simpson, New York City.*

I guess my favorite stories are the animal stuff written by Harold F. Cruickshank. Gee, that fellow sure knows his north country and the animals that live there. They come alive when he tells about them, and I don't see how anyone can read stories like this without always afterward having a different, more kindly feeling toward creatures of the field and wood. I know that's how they affect me.—*Rodney J. Harrington, Spokane, Wash.*

For my dough, Tombstone and Speedy are the laughin'est hombres that romp through the pages of any mag. They are always doing something wild, and the way they look—one so little, the other so tall, and both so thin—makes them all the more amusing. I'm for 'em, all the way.—*Bob Talcott, Des Moines, Ia.*

There you have it, folks! That's all for this time, and if your letter isn't here, why not let us hear from you before the next issue comes along? Please address all letters and post cards to The Editor, EXCITING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thank you! Meanwhile, every good wish, and we'll be seein' yuh.

—THE EDITOR



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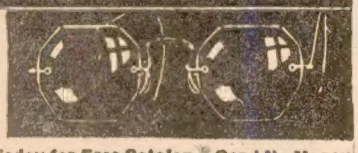

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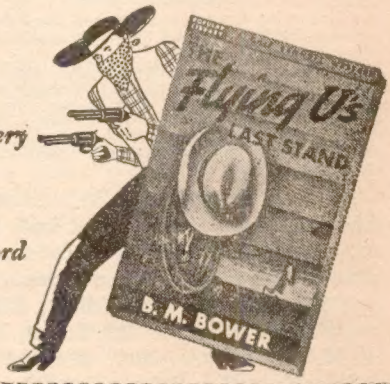

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